

# “Reverend Corser’s Rebellion” Episode Transcript

*Transcript released Jan 16, 2022. To listen to this episode and learn more, visit us online at <https://www.wrangellhistoryunlocked.com/corser>*

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## Introduction

By Ronan Rooney

In 1899, the Presbyterian Church sent a promising, new minister to its flagship mission in Fort Wrangel, Alaska. This was a church with a long legacy, for it was the first Protestant Church in Alaska.

When the Reverend H.P. Corser arrived in Fort Wrangel, he saw a congregation and community split along racial lines. He began speaking out, challenging the community, and eventually, challenging his superiors in the Presbyterian Church. The conflict would get worse until it would lead to a walk-out, culminating in the founding of H.P. Corser’s most lasting contribution: St. Philip’s Episcopal Church.

Today’s episode is Reverend Corser’s Rebellion.

# Chapter 1. Genesis

## In the Beginning

Harry Prosper Corser went by “H.P.” his entire life.

H.P. was born on April 13, 1864<sup>1</sup> in the rural hamlet of Portageville, New York. He was raised in Towanda, Pennsylvania.

H.P. was the first of three sons born to John Farmer Corser and his wife, Harriet. H.P. got his middle name from his mother’s father, Prosper Smith.

Harriet was Prosper’s youngest child, and she was gifted. While the other women in the family worked as cleaning women, Harriet was a music teacher by the age of 18, and she shared her love of music with her boys.

H.P. was thoughtful, intelligent, and sensitive. And he loved addressing an audience. When he was 21, H.P. graduated from Lafayette College in Pennsylvania. His classmates recognized his talent for speech, and appointed him as Class Poet, and he addressed their graduate ceremony in 1885.<sup>2</sup>

H.P. was modest in manners and appearance. He was not very tall, but slight, and wore his dark hair short, parted neatly on the side. He bore a generous smile, beneath a bushy mustache and prominent hook nose. His thin-rimmed spectacles added to his distinguished qualities.

H.P. Corser became a teacher, and taught lessons in private schools around New England. After a few years of teaching, he felt something

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<sup>1</sup> Biographies of Alaska-Yukon Pioneers 1850 - 1950 Vol 2

<sup>2</sup> The Delta Upsilon Quarterly, Volumes 2-3 Front Cover Delta Upsilon Fraternity., 1884

missing. He went back to school to try a new profession: law. After two years of law school, he graduated in 1889 and was admitted to the Pennsylvania Bar. H.P. Corser was a bona fide lawyer, but incredibly, he returned to teaching in the classroom.

His twenties had been spent in classrooms, either as the pupil or as the instructor. In 1894, he heard the calling that would change his life forever: to become a minister.

## Joining the Ministry

Once again the student, he attended Union Theological Seminary for two years, graduating in 1896. Corser was 30, ambitious, smart, and energetic. But he had lived his whole life in the familiar hamlets of New England.

The Presbyterian Mission gave him a challenge. Months after graduation, the church sent H.P. Corser to Arizona Territory.<sup>3</sup> He passed an examination in front of the Arizona synod,<sup>4</sup> was granted a license to preach, and assume the ministry of the church in Flagstaff. A notice from the July 29, 1897 Flagstaff Sun-Democrat newspaper said:

“The Sabbath was made for Man,” will be the text next Sunday morning at the Presbyterian church. The evening discourse will have for its theme “What Men think they have and have not.” Strangers cordially welcomed. H.P. Corser, Pastor.<sup>5</sup>

After only two years, Corser returned to Pennsylvania. The Arizona Republic newspaper lamented:

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<sup>3</sup> Biographical Catalogue of Lafayette College, 1832-1912 1913

<sup>4</sup> Albuquerque Journal ALBUQUERQUE, NEW MEXICO Saturday, September 19, 1896

<sup>5</sup>The Flagstaff Sun-Democrat, Flagstaff, Arizona, 29 Jul 1897, Thu • Page 3

It is with deep regret that the community witnesses Mr. Corser's departure. His labors here have been fruitful of permanent benefit, especially among the young men and boys with whom he has always exerted a strong influence for good. He is an earnest, practical, generous man, and he will be long held in kindly remembrance by the people of Flagstaff.<sup>6</sup>

## Orders to Alaska

By the end of the century, H.P. Corser was back in Pennsylvania, where he started. He had wandered through life, as a teacher, then a lawyer, and now a minister.

On the other side of the continent, the Klondike Gold Rush was in full swing. Alaska was bombarded by thousands of fortune seekers looking for a route to the gold fields of the Canadian Klondike. The cover of the book "Stikine River Route to the Klondike" advertised the Stikine as the "shortest, safest, quickest, and best" route to the rich gold deposits of the Klondike. In actuality, the Stikine Route was one of the most hazardous and deadly, with no guarantee of success. Despite this, thousands came through Fort Wrangel on their way up the Stikine River.

Just before the Klondike Gold Rush, Fort Wrangel was a scrappy White settlement next to a much larger, and older, Tlingit village. When ex-Marine Van Buskirk visited Fort Wrangel in 1896, he described the scene:

There is only one lodging house in Wrangel: it is a rather dirty, badly equipped place, run in connection with a whiskey saloon by Frederick Lynch. Here I must of necessity put up... I don't think there are more than half a dozen white families in the town; perhaps as many in which the

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<sup>6</sup> Arizona Republic, Phoenix, Arizona, 05 Oct 1898, Wed • Page 3

wives are Tlingit, and another half dozen, I take it, in which white men simply live with [Native women].<sup>7</sup>

Van Buskirk also observed that town had only one church, the Presbyterian mission. Twenty years earlier, the congregation in Fort Wrangel was formed by a Tsimshian Christian named Philip Clah McKay, who ministered to Fort Wrangel's Alaska Native population. When Clah fell into ill health and died, he handed off the reigns to Amanda McFarland, who ran the boarding school for Native girls, and Sheldon Jackson, who earned national fame with his stories about his work among Alaska Natives. The Reverend S. Hall Young would follow, and publish extensively about his Tlingit congregation.

Before the Klondike Gold Rush, the Presbyterian mission in Fort Wrangel was founded by, and made of, Alaska Natives. But the Klondike Gold Rush changed everything.

For several years, the mission had been under the stewardship of Dr. Clarence Thwing and his wife, Carrie. He was a medical doctor by training, not a clergyman.

When the Klondike Gold Rush hit Fort Wrangel, the town's White population exploded. These White newcomers balked sharing a church with Native people, even though the Native people built the church and worshiped in it for decades. In March 1898, the White members of the church splintered, and formed what they called the Second Presbyterian Church. According to a report of the Commissioner of Education,

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<sup>7</sup> An Excursion to Wrangell, 1896. Robert D. Monroe. *The Pacific Northwest Quarterly*. Vol. 50, No. 2 (Apr., 1959), pp. 48-52.

The native church has a communicant roll of 85 and a Sabbath-school membership of 100. A church composed of white settlers was organized... with 23 members.<sup>8</sup>

A year into this schism, the Reverend H.P. Corser was sent to Fort Wrangel to minister to two divided congregations. On June 24th, 1899, H.P. Corser boarded a steamship bound for Fort Wrangel.<sup>9</sup>

What he found would change his life forever. H.P. Corser was about to meet the Tlingit.

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<sup>8</sup> Report of the Commissioner of Education Volume 2 1899

<sup>9</sup> Democrat and Chronicle, Rochester, New York, 18 Jun 1899, Sun • Page 7

# Chapter 2. Lamentations

## Making Waves

Throughout his life, H.P. Corser was a model of New England refinement and manners. He was studious and articulate. He seldom strayed outside the lines.

And yet, when he arrived in Fort Wrangel, something changed. H.P. Corser emerged as something of a non-conformist, stepping up to the challenge, and finding himself aligned with the Alaska Native people he came to know.

When H.P. Corser arrived in Fort Wrangel, he encountered a community segregated along racial lines. From the Wrangell Historical Society,

The town's population during the first decade of the twentieth century totaled roughly 800 people, including both Natives and non-Natives. Many early prominent non-Native businessmen had married Indian women; however, the Native and non-Native communities remained separate. The Natives occupied the south end of town, went to a separate school, and had limited opportunities to participate in Wrangell's economic life.<sup>10</sup>

H.P. Corser's own flock was divided in two: the First Presbyterian Church, who founded and shepherded Fort Wrangel's Presbyterian mission for whole generation, and the one year-old Second Presbyterian Church, comprised of White outsiders who came with the Klondike Gold Rush stampede. Having two congregations stretched the demands on his time. He delivered five services a week for his Native congregation, and three service a week for his White congregation. Sunday schools were separate, as well.

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<sup>10</sup> National Register of Historic Places Inventory-Nomination Form, Received March 31 1987.

The US Army's response to reigning in the mayhem of the Klondike Gold Rush was to station a detachment of the 24th Infantry in Fort Wrangel. The 24th Infantry has the distinction of being known in history as the Buffalo Soldiers: African-American men, many of them former slaves, who served in the United States Army throughout the American West.

H.P. Corser, and his Native congregation, welcomed these African-American soldiers with open arms. A visitor from the Synod of Washington wrote,

H.P. Corser, who recently took charge of our work, was overjoyed to see us and we all attended the native church... The choir consisting of Indians and of United States regulars... from the fort, assisted in the singing, and a group from the native church sang "Jesus lover of my soul," in English and in their own tongue. Mr. Corser extolled the faithfulness of the Indian brethren and their zeal in prayer.<sup>11</sup>

The same month, Corser found himself embroiled in a controversy with the newspaper editor of the Douglas Island News. Corser had delivered a sermon supporting belief in both evolution and Christianity. The editor accused Corser of being an "infidel" and called evolution a complete humbug.<sup>12</sup> The Stikeen River Journal captured Corser's response:

Rev. Mr. Corser, on being shown the article... said in his usual good natured way, that... he was quite willing to make his position clear... Evolution as applied to physical nature is no longer a theory resting upon the logic of a Darwin or a Spenser, but is an established fact. The evidence is indelibly stamped in the 'Rocks of Ages,' from the primary stratum of

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<sup>11</sup> The Interior, Volume 30 Front Cover Western Presbyterian Publishing Company, 1899

<sup>12</sup> Douglas Island News, Douglas, Alaska, 16 Aug 1899, Wed • Page 1



the Silurian period, to the last sod of the Tertiary. It is an open book as plain as Holy Writ.<sup>13</sup>

In 1902, When President Teddy Roosevelt single-handedly created the Alexander Archipelago Forest Reserve, H.P. Corser protested. Alaska Native people still own this land, said Corser. The president had no right to put Native lands into a reserve, especially when Native people never extinguished their claim, use, or occupancy of the land. Corser feared that Seattle's timber lobby would seize all the timber, while Tlingit and Haida people would not even be able to collect for even so much as firewood.<sup>14</sup>

In H.P. Corser's first years in Fort Wrangel, he quickly aligned with the interests of his Tlingit congregation. He was not only a minister, but a trained lawyer, with years of education, and he lent his voice to advancing the interests of his Tlingit congregants.

Throughout his life, the single most important issue to H.P. Corser was education. And when he began to speak out about the poor quality of education for Tlingit children in Fort Wrangel, H.P. Corser crossed the point of no return.

## **Criticizes Presbyterian Leaders**

From his first arrival, he lobbied for a teacher at Fort Wrangel. When the Secretary of the Board of Home Missions visited, Corser personally got the man to:

promise to endeavor to secure from Congress next winter a teacher for the native children, seventy-five to a hundred, of school age at Wrangel.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Douglas Island News, Douglas, Alaska, 30 Aug 1899, Wed • Page 5

<sup>14</sup> A History of the United States Forest Service in Alaska, by Lawrence Rakestraw

<sup>15</sup> The Standard Union, Brooklyn, New York, 23 Sep 1899, Sat • Page 4

Corser described his first arrival to Fort Wrangel as,

whites and Indians were both suffering. As for example at that time there was not in the town of Wrangell... a boy or girl under 16 years of age that knew as much as the multiplication table.<sup>16</sup>

The responsibility to education Fort Wrangel's children fell somewhere between the U.S. federal government and the Presbyterian Board of Home Missions. The town was not officially incorporated as a city, which meant the town had no way to levy taxes to pay for schools.

Corser was fed up waiting for the powers back east to solve the problem of educating the young people in Fort Wrangel.

He published his complaints in the local newspaper. He admonished his own superiors in the Presbyterian Board of Home Missions, including Sheldon Jackson. He accused them of raising money without getting results.

The Board noticed. Corser received a stern letter of reprimand. He was to never again publicly criticize Sheldon Jackson, the Presbyterian mission, or any of its employees again.

Writing about this moment in later years, Corser let loose on Sheldon Jackson.

Dr. Jackson lined himself up with those people that had made large investments in Alaska, were exploiting it, and whose ambitions were to get as much out of it as possible and to do as little about the evils that have resulted from absentee landlords...<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> 59th Congress: 1st Session, Senate Documents, Vol 23. pp. 86-87.

<sup>17</sup> Seventy-Six Page History of Alaska, H.P. Corser, p. 42.

It was charged, and sometimes with great show of truthfulness, that many of the educational reports that were sent to Washington were interesting works of fiction.<sup>18</sup>

[Jackson's] book shows that he absolutely failed to understand Alaska and its people.<sup>19</sup>

The topic of self-government was popular among Alaskans, but Sheldon Jackson opposed it, as self-government threatened his power.

H.P. Corser, who had hardly made waves in Arizona or Pennsylvania, was now taking up fights in Alaska. He was unhappy with his bosses, and letting them know it. He suspected them of being disingenuous, self-serving, and dishonest. He had barely been on the job three years.

## **William Duncan**

H.P. Corser may have had grand ambitions for his Tlingit congregation, one that involved relocating and founding a new community. In an interview with a Presbyterian publication, Corser let slip his great wish:

...Anxious to remove his Indians from the contaminations of the white people at Wrangle to some island where, shut in by the sheltering arms of the sea, they might carry on industries which would make them self-supporting.<sup>20</sup>

This is similar to the story of William Duncan and the founding of Metlakatla. Fifteen years before, William Duncan was an Anglican missionary in Canada, ministering to a congregation of Tsimshian converts.

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<sup>18</sup> Seventy-Six Page History of Alaska, H.P. Corser, pp. 48-49.

<sup>19</sup> Seventy-Six Page History of Alaska, H.P. Corser, pp. 48-49.

<sup>20</sup> Minutes - United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. (1901) - Page 256

When he fell into a dispute with his church superiors, he relocated the entire community—people and buildings—from the Canadian interior to Anette Island in coastal southeast Alaska. They founded Metlakatla, a self-sustaining community, and still Alaska's only Native reservation.

Writing in later years, Corser offered glowing praise of Metlakatla:

The success of the Metlakatla Indians under William Duncan in the southern end of Alaska had been an inspiration to other Indian towns all through Southeastern Alaska. Each Indian community was anxious to have their town as good as was Metlakatla. In communities where Indian towns and white settlements were together there was always a difficulty.<sup>21</sup>

The quiet, modest New England pastor, H.P. Corser, was ruffling feathers and had grand ambitions. By criticizing his superiors in the Church, he risked being stranded jobless in this remote Alaskan outpost. The Presbyterian Board sent H.P. Corser to quell the chaos caused by the Klondike Gold Rush. Instead, H.P. Corser vigorously stirred the pot, charting his own course, one that would lead down the path of exodus.

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<sup>21</sup> Seventy-Six Page History of Alaska, H.P. Corser, p. 49.

# Chapter 3. Exodus

## Stand Up

It's 1979. Alice Rooney, a young Episcopal church volunteer from California, sits down for a chat with one of her church's elders, a man named Bill Taylor. Bill is very old at this time, with a high pitched, wheezing voice and a persistent cough. Still, he regales this wide-eyed missionary with stories about his youth.

Bill was born in 1895. He remembers Fort Wrangel. The Klondike Gold Rush. The Star of Bengal. The great fire of 1906.

And Bill was there, the day H.P. Corser led a rebellion of the First Presbyterian Church.

Alice Rooney tape-recorded these conversations, with Bill's permission. The audio is badly degraded and not easy to hear. Here is the transcript of Bill Taylor's eyewitness account of Reverend Corser's Rebellion:

He was having trouble with the big shots, the heads of the Presbyterian Church. They, too, were against mixing with the Indians, and Wrangell was full of Indians at that time...

So there was the heads of the Presbyterian Church came here and they saw that and they told Corser it had to be done or he had to be removed as minister. So after those people left he had a big meeting... And he said he would have to be relieved of his responsibility as a minister or else start a church of his own.

"Now," he said, "I have an appointment comin' up. If I want it from the Episcopalian Church, they said we could start a church of our own... I

wonder how many people in this congregation would follow me? All those that would, I wish you'd stand up."

The whole church just bounced up just like a balloon... all them Indian people were [on the right side]. My mother was Indian, my Dad was a white man, and we were on [the left] side, and we all jumped up just like that [snaps fingers]. Nothin' to it.

So, when that was over, Mister Corser stood up there by the pulpit and he couldn't talk. He just kinda' mumble, tears come down his face like that. Took his handkerchief finally and rubbed his face up just by himself, sobbed good n' heavy and got it out.

After that, why, he said, "All right, now. Now we have to find out a place where we can start a foundation to build a church on and we have to raise some money, somehow, some way, to do it with!"

H.P. Corser's Tlingit congregation set him free. They took a chance on each other, one that would pay off. Together, they would forge a Christian identity, infused with Tlingit, Haida, Tsimshian, and Indigenous sensibilities.

The church adopted the name The People's Church. Its location touched of the Tlingit village to the south, a physical symbol of its alignment with the Native community.

If Corser was waiting for the right time to leave the Presbyterian Church, he found it. 1903 was also the year that Fort Wrangell adopted self-government, and became the City of Wrangell. It could levy taxes and support a school. In order to pursue his lifelong passion for education, H.P. Corser and Fort Wrangell no longer depended solely on Presbyterian oversight.

## Fallout

Corser's rebellion was not the end for the Presbyterian mission in Fort Wrangell, far from it. The rift was painful, but the mission had deep roots. The Presbyterian Board of Home Missions called home one of its most prolific, accomplished, and respected missionaries. She was a powerhouse, hard-working and whip smart. She also was also half-Tlingit and from Fort Wrangel.

They called in Tillie Paul-Tamaree. She knew Fort Wrangel, having grown up there, leading the younger children in activities, and translating the minister's sermons into Tlingit. She quickly earned respect for her high intelligence and missionary zeal.<sup>22</sup> She was away from Fort Wrangel on another mission when she got the word about Corser's rebellion. She did not want to return, but she relented.<sup>23</sup> She was successful at restoring some, but not all, of the Native congregants to the Presbyterian mission.<sup>24</sup>

In September 1905, the Douglas Island News reported that "The People's Church at Wrangell, has gone over, body and breeches, to the Episcopalians."<sup>25</sup> Two years later, H.P. Corser was ordained an Episcopal priest by Bishop Peter Trimble Rowe.<sup>26</sup>

The schism in Fort Wrangel's Presbyterian Church did not begin with H.P. Corser. It started before he arrived, under Dr. Clarence Thwing. Corser, like his congregation, came to a breaking point.

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<sup>22</sup> Remarkable Alaska Women: More Than Petticoats, by Cherry Jones Lyons, p. 19.

<sup>23</sup> We Are Alaskans. Boston: W. A. Wilde Co.

<sup>24</sup> "THEIR WORKS DO FOLLOW THEM"1: TLINGIT WOMEN AND PRESBYTERIAN MISSIONS by ALISON RUTH PARRY, B.A., The University of Alberta, 1991

<sup>25</sup> Douglas Island News. Douglas, Alaska. 06 Sep 1905, Wed • Page 1

<sup>26</sup> Journal of the General Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America 1907

The City of Wrangell, which incorporated in 1903—the same year as Corser’s rebellion—now had two churches with deep roots in Wrangell’s Alaska Native community. Wrangell was growing up.



# Chapter 4. Acts

## Politics

H.P. Corser described his congregation like this:

The people are hard-headed and very practical, and expected much from their minister.<sup>27</sup>

H.P. Corser spent the rest of his life based out of Wrangell, occasionally ministering in Juneau, Ketchikan, and the newly established community of Norwegian immigrants called Petersburg.

He continued to speak out on the economic interests of his Tlingit congregation. He spoke out against the fisheries syndicate,<sup>28</sup> was in favor of Alaskan self-government,<sup>29</sup> and helped to sell Liberty Bonds during World War I.<sup>30</sup>

His civic record was long. He served on the board of the Red Cross, was active in the Chamber of Commerce<sup>31</sup> and the Igloo of Pioneers, served on the School Board, and he ran the Boy Scouts.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Biographies of Alaska-Yukon Pioneers, 1850-1950, Volume 2. Page 62.

<sup>28</sup> The Oregon Daily Journal (Portland, Oregon). 01 Sep 1911, Fri

<sup>29</sup> Pacific Fisherman, vol XXI, No 1, Seattle, Washington January 1923

<sup>30</sup> The Tribune. Scranton, Pennsylvania. 10 Oct 1918, Thu • Page 5

<sup>31</sup> Biographies of Alaska-Yukon Pioneers, 1850-1950, Volume 5. Pp 68-69.

<sup>32</sup> The Spirit of Missions 1913, p. 42

## Education

His heart was in education. He became principal of the Wrangell schools in 1903.<sup>33</sup> The church built a gymnasium, along with a reading room, and offered the first education to Native boys in Wrangell beyond 8th grade.<sup>34</sup>

Corser's Saint Philips was also very active in the earliest days of the Alaska Native Brotherhood.<sup>35</sup>

## Totem Lore

H.P. Corser was a bookish man. He was well-educated, well-read, and meticulous. It may have come as no surprise when he came asking his Tlingit parishioners to share their clan stories for a book.

Corser loved stories. He had tried his hand at writing plays. He gave lantern shows, which were early versions of the slide projector, using a flickering lantern to project images onto the wall. Throughout his life, he was in front of an audience, whether teaching, ministering, or storytelling.

Corser's congregation was full of stories — epic stories, as big as anything told by the Greeks or the Romans — all set in the wilderness of southeast Alaska. In these stories, people met face-to-face with spirit worlds and animals capable of speech and transformation. The stories boil down to tales of life, death, honor, and family. These stories lived in spoken word, an oral tradition going back centuries. But the modern world threatened this tradition, and the very survival of these stories.

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<sup>33</sup> Douglas Island News. Douglas, Alaska, 19 Aug 1903, Wed • Page 1

<sup>34</sup> National Registry application.

<sup>35</sup> Memory Eternal Tlingit Culture and Russian Orthodox Christianity Through Two Centuries By Sergei Kan, Professor of Anthropology and Native American Studies Sergei Kan · 1999

There was no doubt the world was interested in these stories, too. Tourism was already an active trade in Wrangell and other Alaskan destinations. Tourists snatched up trinkets sold by Tlingit traders in Wrangell. In Seattle, a totem pole stolen from Tongass village drew big crowds. Sacred artifacts and clan symbols had already disappeared into the hands of collectors.

In Alaska Native tradition, clan stories are owned, as much as clan symbols, land, waterways, and physical property. H.P. Corser was also a relative newcomer to Alaska, hoping to take something uniquely Native American and share it with the world. And yet, H.P. Corser was no raider. He was close to these people.

Before Corser, there were ministers in Alaska who tried to forbid the telling of clan stories. Those were the old ways, they said, leave them behind. Corser embraced the stories. He saw the lessons, and he knew other people would, too.

In 1910, H.P. Corser published the book that would change his life. From Juneau's Daily Record Miner:

Next week "The Story of the Totem" a legendary folk-lore history of the native totem pole will be printed from this office. The interesting manuscript is by Rev. H.P. Corser of Wrangell and the edition will consist of 10,000 copies.

The book was a modest success. In future editions, Corser renamed his book to "Totem Lore of the Alaska Indian, and the Land of the Totem." He became known as something of an expert on Alaska Native culture.

When tourists came to Wrangell, he often greeted them at the church, then gave them a tour of the totem poles and their meaning.<sup>36</sup> For several years, he worked as an interpreter aboard a ship bringing tourists up to Alaska.<sup>37</sup>

By sharing the stories, he helped to bridge a gap. Said Corser:

I quickly saw that before you can do much with the people, you must learn to understand them first. How do they look at things? This led me to get as familiar as I could with their legends and their theory of life.<sup>38</sup>

## Pennsylvania

His mother and father lived into old age, and he often visited them in Pennsylvania the fall. He made the month-long trek from Alaska down to Washington, then east to Pennsylvania. His visits generated newspaper publicity for his sermons and his lantern shows.

When H.P. Corser was the guest speaker, he tailored his lantern shows to the interests of the audience. One trip to Pennsylvania, he entertained a group of scouts on the subject of “Indians, Boy Scouts, Hunters and Big Game in Alaska”,<sup>39</sup> and to a church group on the “good work being done by missionaries and ministers of the gospel.”<sup>40</sup> He could tailor his talk to any audience using the same slides.

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<sup>36</sup> Digital copy of postcard in author’s possession.

<sup>37</sup> Press-Courier. Oxnard, California. 20 Aug 1928, Mon • Page 3

<sup>38</sup> Biographies of Alaska-Yukin Pioneers, 1850-1950, Volume 2. Page 63.

<sup>39</sup> The Tribune. Scranton, Pennsylvania. 17 Oct 1911, Tue • Page 2

<sup>40</sup> Pittston Gazette. Pittston, Pennsylvania. 12 Oct 1911, Thu • Page 3

The Tlingit people H.P. Corser met changed his life. They gave his direction, a meaning, a purpose. He made his life's work among these people, presenting their side to the world.

# Chapter 5. Revelation

## Injured Fighting Fire

In October 1930, during a windy, snowy blizzard, a fire raged inside the Presbyterian Church in Wrangell. It was the same old wooden building Reverend Corser first arrived at, and the same building he walked out of, some thirty years before. The whole town turned out to put out the roaring blaze.

At the age of 60, Reverend Corser rushed to help put out the fire. If he any hard feelings about the past, he didn't let them get in the way. Tragically, the building was a total loss, and Corser was seriously injured in attempting to save the building. The Fairbanks Daily Newsminer reported:

The Rev. H. P. Corser, pastor of the Episcopal church at Wrangell, was so seriously hurt in helping to fight the blaze that he will be incapacitated for some time. He fell, suffering painful body injuries.<sup>41</sup>

In a portrait photo taken in the later years of his life, his frame is noticeably heavier, and his shiny, swollen hands suggests he had edema.

Two years after his injury, he paid what would be his final visit to his family in Pennsylvania. Despite his noticeable infirmity, he delivered the New Years sermon at St. Mark's Episcopal Church<sup>42</sup> and a free, public lecture on "Indian Lore of Alaska."<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Fairbanks Daily News-Miner. Fairbanks, Alaska. 31 Oct 1930, Fri • Page 4

<sup>42</sup> The North Adams Transcript. North Adams, Massachusetts. 31 Dec 1932, Sat • Page 9

<sup>43</sup> The Evening Times. Sayre, Pennsylvania. 20 Jan 1933, Fri • Page 3

Wherever he traveled, he talked about the people who had changed his life. His identity connected directly to the Tlingit. One year before he died, a chance encounter on a vessel traveling through Alaska would demonstrate the identity H.P. Corser created for himself. From the Pomona Progress Bulletin, in 1935:

“What does the word ‘totem’ mean?,” we asked a clerk who was trying to to sell us one made of finest quality ivory and magnificently carved.

"I haven't an idea in the world," she blankly replied, and then seeing a distinguished looking, elderly man nearby she nodded toward him and added, "I believe he can tell you."

The man thus pointed out was none other than the Rev. H. P. Corser... For 35 years he has labored in this, his beloved land. Looked up to by the Indians and sought for his counsel and help, he has naturally gained [their] confidence... Many of them have told him their legends. These he put into his books.

The article then quoted Corser directly. He said:

"Everything wind, trees, mountains, rivers, birds, fish had its special spirit. It was considered a great honor if anybody came in contact with one of these spirits. A family that had no contact with a spirit was considered very poor indeed. Totems served as memorials, as coats of arms and for a great variety of purposes."<sup>44</sup>

## Death

On Sunday, February 3, 1936, H.P. Corser died of a stroke in Wrangell, Alaska. He was 72 years old.

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<sup>44</sup> The Pomona Progress Bulletin. Pomona, California. 09 Jul 1935, Tue • Page 4

He never married and had no children.

In 1987, the Wrangell Historical Society petitioned the National Park Service to include St. Philip's Episcopal Church on the National Register of Historic Places. In the nomination form, the society wrote,

Harry P. Corser influenced the social history of Wrangell when he boldly defied convention by supporting the rights of Natives to worship with the non-Native community. His defiance of convention and open admiration of Native culture influenced the non-Native community.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> National Register of Historic Places Inventory-Nomination Form, Received March 31 1987.