

“Reading Wrangell Historians”

Episode Transcript

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Introduction

In 1675, Isaac Newton wrote, “If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.”

The study of Wrangell history is no different. There are giants in the field whose work lifts us all up.

Today, on Wrangell History Unlocked, we’ll take a deeper look at three historians who have contributed significantly to our understanding of Wrangell history: Patricia A. Neal, Bonnie Demerjian, and Pat Roppel.

After that, we’ll wrap up with a quick look at three books, by other authors, that tell unique stories from Wrangell’s past.

Though Wrangell is small, its historians are mighty.

Chapter 1. Patricia A. Neal

Our first author has published three books on Wrangell history, each one expertly researched and filled with interesting details. Patricia A. Neal previously worked for over a decade as the Wrangell Museum Director and Curator. She brings years of experience in Wrangell history to her books.

A. Fort Wrangel, Alaska: Gateway to the Stikine River: 1834 - 1899

Patricia A. Neal's first book, published in 2007, is about Wrangell's wild frontier days. The book is entitled Fort Wrangel, Alaska: Gateway to the Stikine River: 1834 - 1899. During the 1800s, Wrangell was the site of many power struggles, featuring the Russians, the British, the United States, and the indigenous peoples of Alaska. Wrangell sustained three gold rushes in this time, and became one of Alaska's largest settlements.

If you're interested in Wrangell's tent city days, these are the years to study. Fort Wrangel, Alaska: Gateway to the Stikine River: 1834- 1899 is a well-written narrative of the history of Wrangell from pre-history through the beginning of the 20th century.

B. Stikine River Journal: Early Days on the Stikine River

Patricia A. Neal's second book was published in 2012, entitled Stikine River Journal: Early Days on the Stikine River. It's an excellent companion to her first book. Where the Fort Wrangel book is a narrative that weaves together a full story start to finish, this book is packed with short articles, clippings, and stories. Each section is no more than a few pages, making this a fun book to read on the go.

Stikine River Journal: Early Days on the Stikine River is fast and unpredictable, like the times it describes.

B. Wrangell Garnet Ledge History

Patricia A. Neal's most recent book came out in 2016. Wrangell Garnet Ledge History is the true story of two lifelong partners, Anna B. Durkee and Mary T. Elmer, who came to southeast Alaska in 1906 to investigate a copper mining claim. During a layover in Wrangell, the two women learned about a garnet mining claim near the mouth of the Stikine River. They hatched a plan to buy the claim, for one million dollars, by raising the funds from women they knew back home around Minnesota. Together, these women incorporated as shareholders of Alaska Garnet Mining & Manufacturing, the first American corporation fully run by women. Men were only employed to work in the mines.

Wrangell Garnet Ledge History is the type of story I aspire to do on this show. It's not just captivating because it's a first for American women, but it's a story about people going up against the odds, challenging the norms, and being successful. Patricia A. Neal did lots of research to bring this story to light, including contacting living descendants of the story's main characters.

My favorite person in this book is Cleora Sprague, the 62 year-old woman hired to guard the mine from claim jumpers. She dressed like a man, carried a rifle, and went by the nickname "Napoleon." There's even a story about her dog, Muggins, who had been a stray dog in Wrangell that became a nuisance, was set to be executed, then found his second chance at life living as her companion at Garnet Ledge.¹

Our next author is also a scholar devoted to understanding Wrangell and its unique relationship to the Stikine River. When we come back, we'll explore the books of Wrangell historian Bonnie Demerjian.

¹ Wrangell Garnet Ledge History, p. 48-54.

Chapter 2. Bonnie Demerjian

A. Roll On! Discovering the Wild Stikine River

Bonnie Demerjian has held a number of positions in Wrangell, in the schools, writing for the Wrangell Sentinel, and becoming a published author with her first book in 2006. Roll On! Discovering the Wild Stikine River is named for the Woody Guthrie song, Roll On, Columbia!

This book is a full 360° look at all the topics of the Stikine River. It's got biology, geology, politics, history, and economics of the Stikine River. The Stikine River is integral to Wrangell history, and this book has it, along with a deep study of the natural sciences of the region. This book is a terrific companion to have on the Stikine River. There's something for you, whether it's about the flowers at your feet, the mountains above, or the history of the spots nearby.

B. Anan: Stream of Living Water

Wrangell has always been more than Wrangell Island. After all, what would Wrangell be without the the water? Bonnie Demerjian's second book, Anan: Stream of Living Water is a study of Anan, a natural saltwater lagoon south of Wrangell Island. Anan is famous for its salmon runs, wild bears, and US Forest Service observatory. According to the Forest Service, "During the salmon run, from late June to late August, visitors may also see brown bears, bald eagles, several species of gulls, and harbor seals in the area."²

Anan: Stream of Living Water and Roll On! Discovering the Wild Stikine River both feature beautiful photography by Ivan Simonek. These are both important works, that affirm the importance of understanding Wrangell not just in terms of the island's coastline, but it's connection with the waterways nearby.

² https://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/r10/specialplaces/?cid=fsbdev2_038752

C. Images of America: Wrangell

Bonnie Demerjian's third book is really one of my favorites. Wherever you travel in the United States these days, you often see the Images of America books by Arcadia Publishing. The series features old photos of America's cities, small and big. In 2011, Bonnie Demerjian published Images of America: Wrangell. It's got tons of great photos of old Wrangell, showing you the places and faces of Wrangell's past. The captions to the photos contain a ton of research, as well. There's a ton of easily accessible Wrangell

This is my favorite book to crack open with people who know Wrangell. You're looking at old photos, and suddenly it clicks. You imagine yourself there, knowing exactly what it's like to standing on that spot. This is a fun coffee table book, because its large photos are easily engaging for readers of any age.

D. Rock Art of Southeast Alaska

Bonnie Demerjian's latest book is Rock Art of Southeast Alaska, published in 2015. Most histories of Wrangell focus on the past two-hundred years. This book talks about Wrangell over ten-thousand years ago, as the first humans migrated from Asia through southeast Alaska. These earliest people left behind cryptic, symbolic artwork in the rock, in carvings, called petroglyphs, and rock paintings which survive today. Many pieces of ancient rock art have disappeared, but perhaps many more remain to be discovered.

Why did people leave these rock carvings? What do these faces, animals, and shapes mean? Rock Art of Southeast Alaska explores the different theories offered by artists, anthropologists, Alaska Native descendants, and others.

The most compelling, and interesting, theory I found was that rock art may have been carved in a trance. Shamanism has ancient roots in southeast Alaska, and shaman were known to enter trance-like states through fasting

and other methods. The rhythmic, repetitive process of tapping out a pattern on a rock may have induced a trance in the artist. This may help explain why some rock art shapes, such as the spiral, are found by ancient rock art carvers around the world, who experienced the same phenomena.

Next, we'll talk about a historian with fifty years of published work in Alaska history. Her pen is prolific and reaches into the work of many historians. When we come back, we'll survey of the works of Pat Roppel.

Chapter 3. Pat Roppel

It's hard to assess the full body of Pat Roppel's work. She authored thirteen books and at least one-hundred articles. She edited, reviewed, encouraged, and inspired many Alaska historians in their work. Her name appears in countless Acknowledgments and dedications.

She was named Alaska Historian of the Year, twice.³ She was a member of the Alaska Historical Commission, the Alaska Humanities Forum, and the Tongass Historical Society, the latter of which established a scholarship for Alaska History students in her honor.⁴ Pat Roppel is a historian's historian.

Pat Roppel moved to Ketchikan, Alaska in 1959, with her husband, Frank. She taught Home Economics, and began down the path of studying Alaska history. She published her first article in the Alaska Sportsman in 1965. What followed were thirteen books, countless articles, and a weekly column run throughout the newspapers of southeast Alaska.⁵ When she was not publishing her own books, she was helping other authors by reading manuscripts to construct into index pages.

Many of Pat Roppel's published works go back decades, and are out of print, making for a treasure hunt to get them all, and difficult to individually describe here. Pat Roppel's first book, Southeast Alaska's Panhandle, is part of the Alaska Geographic series, and published in 1978. She published twelve more books throughout the decades, including her last in 2014, Steamboat Bay Cannery Historic Survey and Architectural Recordation with Stephen Peters.

From 2004 to 2010, she published a monthly newsletter for the Friends of the Wrangell Museum. In total, she published 72 issues, each one packed with stories from Wrangell and its environs.

³ http://www.sitnews.us/0115News/011015/Obit/011015_pat_roppe.html

⁴ <https://www.tongasshistory.org/pat-roppe-scholarship/>

⁵ http://www.sitnews.us/0115News/011015/Obit/011015_pat_roppe.html

Pat Roppel passed away on January 6, 2015, almost fifty years after the publication of her first article. When she passed, the Alaska Historical Society wrote, “We lost a friend, a mentor, and a trailblazer of a historian at the beginning of January when Pat Roppel died. No one has done more to document the history of canneries in Alaska than Pat. From her seminal work, *Salmon from Kodiak* to her weekly columns that tracked the trajectory of canneries, salteries, and fishing boats published in the *Capital City Weekly*, Pat’s canon of work is voluminous and far-reaching.”⁶

Patricia A. Neal’s *Wrangell Garnet Ledge History* is dedicated to Pat Roppel. In the dedication, Neal wrote, “Pat will be missed but she has left a legacy of historical knowledge that will live on. I will miss her encouragement, her vast knowledge about mining in Alaska, her humor, and that she was only an email away after I left Alaska.”

Pat Roppel’s prolific pen means her research, and her voice, lives on forever.

When we come back, we’ll wrap up by quickly surveying three books, by different authors, that each shed a light on a unique piece of Wrangell history.

⁶ <https://alaskahistoricalsociety.org/historian-pat-roppe-to-be-sorely-missed/>

Chapter 4. Recommended Reading

There are many, many excellent books featuring Wrangell's unique past. Here are three books by different authors that stand apart.

A. Kahtahah, a Tlingit Girl

The first book is *Kahtahah, a Tlingit Girl*. If you're new to Wrangell history, I always recommend starting here. Through the story of this young girl, you get to see what Tlingit life was like in Wrangell before, and after, the arrival of the United States. Kahtahah was one of the first to join the Presbyterian mission's Industrial School for Girls run by Amanda McFarland, and quickly became an influential part of the organization. Kahtahah's life tracks in parallel with the major historical changes in Wrangell at the time.

Of course, Kahtahah, would grow up to become Tillie Paul-Tamaree, a real force in Wrangell's history, and the mother of William and Lewis Paul, highly active in the Alaska Native Brotherhood. Tillie recounted her childhood stories to her daughter-in-law, William's wife, Frances Lackey Paul. According to the description from the back of the book,

Frances Lackey Paul taught Tlingit children in a Juneau school early in this century. She wrote *Kahtahah* in 1938 for her students, who asked for stories of their own world. A true-life story of a Tlingit girl who lived in Southeast Alaska in the late 1800s, the book is filled with authentic details of daily Tlingit life—social customs, legends, and adventure.

Though the book is intended for a young people, but it does not spare the tragedies. There are heartbreaking moments from Tillie's childhood, like the death of her mother and being forced into a marriage against her will. Frances Lackey Paul captured her mother-in-law's story and put it into an easily readable format. The book is not long, and each chapter is short.

Frances Lackey Paul passed away in 1970. Six years later, Kahtahah was published featuring illustrations by Rie Muñoz filling the pages, imaginatively depicting the people and scenes in Tillie's story.⁷

B. Bastard of Fort Stikine

The second book is *Bastard of Fort Stikine: the Hudson's Bay Company and the Murder of John McLoughlin Jr.* Published in 2015, this book is a gripping, well-paced historical murder mystery, examined with fresh eyes by crime-scene forensic anthropologist Debra Komar.

Bastard of Fort Stikine takes place in Wrangell in the 1840s, a time when Britain leased and occupied Russia's abandoned post. The Brits were met with misery virtually from the start: unhappy Tlingit neighbors, limited provisions, blistering weather, and seawater creeping under the fort's walls. A mutiny formed against the commander.

From the book's description in *Publisher's Weekly*,

In April of 1842, chief trader John McLoughlin Jr. was assassinated by his own crew of workers at their Hudson's Bay Company post on the Pacific Northwest coast of Canada. The men were known to have disliked McLoughlin and some had threatened to kill him, but the company's governor, Sir George Simpson, relied on their accounts of the incident to conclude that the murder was a matter of self-defense against McLoughlin's drunken rampages. Though the company closed the books on the matter without a trial, McLoughlin's father never relented in his efforts to disprove Simpson's version of the facts.⁸

The author, Debra Komar, is a forensic anthropologist who often turns her analytical lens on crimes of the past. This story has everything. A murder, a coverup, power, ego, and one father's struggle to redeem his son's good name. Once I picked this book up, I could not put it down.

⁷ <https://abcbookworld.com/writer/paul-frances-lackey/>

⁸ <https://www.publishersweekly.com/978-0-86492-871-9>

This book contains the single best explanation for why Russia built a fort in Wrangell that I have ever read. Komar describes it like a chess match, between the crowns of Russia and Britain, competing for power and control across the earth, coming to a clash in southeast Alaska, in Wrangell.

C. Proud Raven, Panting Wolf

The last book I'll share today is Proud Raven, Panting Wolf by Dr. Emily L. Moore. Dr. Moore was raised in Ketchikan, and earned her PhD in the History of Art from the University of California in 2012.

An article in the Alaska Press sets up the story of Proud Raven, Panting Wolf:

In Southeast Alaska, between 1938-1942, the Forest Service and the Civilian Conservation Corp (CCC) under Roosevelt's New Deal restored and replicated Totems which were then planted in European style parks, as a way to employ those in the Pacific Northwest in need of jobs, boost tourism, all with little regard for any cultural significance. And like many government programs, what was cooked up in Washington was idealistic, but would evolve quite differently when put into actual operation in situ. Ironically, the project propelled Totems into the 21st Century as an art form.⁹

Wrangell was one of six communities selected by the federal government to receive totem parks. Wrangell was the only park with its own island. Proud Raven, Panting Wolf features interesting stories about the intersection of art, culture, and government to produce Wrangell's iconic Shakes Island Clan House.

A book review in the Journal of the Association of of Historians of American Art summarized Dr. Moore's three main arguments:

the totem parks are aesthetically, culturally, and politically significant; the parks were part of a larger cultural nationalist movement that sought to identify and preserve America's

⁹ https://www.anchoragepress.com/arts_and_entertainment/proud-raven-panting-wolf-a-history-of-totem-poles-in/article_a11ba0c8-bd4a-11e9-99cf-9351ab45724d.html

heritage; and Tlingit and Haida communities played an active role in the creation and representation of the totem parks, mobilizing the project to advance broader claims of self-determination.¹⁰

D. Conclusion

Before we end today, I want to thank each of the authors I mentioned: Patricia A. Neal, Bonnie Demerjian, Pat Roppel, Frances Lackey Paul, Debra Komar, and Dr. Emily L. Moore. I admire each of them for their tenacity for both the research and the writing. They've each dug into a topic important to understanding Wrangell's history, and they've found gold.

Wrangell History Unlocked is written and produced by Ronan Rooney. Music from today's episode is Gold In Our Garden, by Dara Rilatos.

¹⁰ <https://editions.lib.umn.edu/panorama/article/proud-raven-panting-wolf/>