

CELEBRATING A CENTURY: ST. SAVA CHURCH

HISTORY OF THE SERBIAN EASTERN ORTHODOX CHURCH IN AMERICA

The history of the first Serbian Eastern Orthodox Church in America begins in Jackson, Amador County, California with the building of the St. Sava Church. Property for the church building and the cemetery was purchased on January 11, 1894. Soon after this purchase, construction of the church (and parsonage) started and the cemetery was laid out. The first recorded burial in the cemetery was that of the infant Savo Lepetich in May of 1894; the bell was hung in the original, onion-shaped, wooden belfry on August 22, 1894, and the church was consecrated on December 4, 1894. This year, 1994, is the 100th anniversary of the St. Sava Serbian Orthodox Church of Jackson, California and it is the 100th anniversary of the Serbian Eastern Orthodox Church in America and Canada.

When young, adventurous Serbs came to California, there were already "Slavonians"* here to greet them. The first Slavonians to see the new world, America, came here on John Cabot's ship in 1496. There was a Slavonian at Sutter's Mill when James W. Marshall found gold there. He was the one they called "Sailor Man." Slavs were here mining gold even before Marshall's discovery. The Russians found gold at their colonies of Ross and Bodega in 1814. Slavonians had married Hawaiian princesses in Hawaii and daughters of Spanish Dons in California long before 1894.

The famous Tadich Grill on California Street in San Francisco was established by John Davis (Jovan Devcich) on Commercial Street in that city in 1849. The first secretary of the California Land Commission was George Fisher (Djuro Ribar Sagich). George Fisher came to America in 1825 and he is remembered as an eminent American pioneer. The Serbs were here before 1894, but they did not get together until after the gold-rush days.

It is not surprising that the Serbs came to Amador and Calaveras Counties in the late 19th century. Many of the mining companies in these counties were Slavonian owned or managed. They also came here because many of them were sailors on Adriatic sailing ships that called on California ports before and during the California goldrush. When their ships docked here, they "jumped ship" and made their way to the gold fields of the Mother Lode.

After the goldrush days, many of these pioneers moved to the big cities where they formed social groups. One of the first societies they organized with other Slavonians was the Slavonian Illyrian Benevolent Society of San Francisco in 1857. A branch of this society, one of many branches in California, was established in Sutter Creek, California, in 1872. The Sutter Creek branch erected a lodge building on the society's property. It was located on Tucker Hill, in Sutter Creek, in 1874. This was the first Slavonian social hall built in America.

The Serbs and Russians formed the "Russian, Greek, Serbian Organization of San Francisco" in 1864. Most of the members of this organization were Serbs. The first meeting of this group was held in the home of the Serb Petar Sekulich. The president was a Russian, but many of the trustees were Serbs: Luka and Petar Zenovich, John Franeta from the Pastrovich clan; Nikola and Ilija Dabovich, brothers from the village of Sasovich, Herceg Novi, Boka Kotorska; George Jankovich from Herceg Novi; Savo Martinovich from Montenegro; Ilija Chelovich, Edward, Bozho, and Petar Radovich from Risan; Petar Vukanovich from Trebinje; and, George Lazarevich from Beograd.

Ilija Dabovich, one of the organization's trustees, had four children: two girls and two boys. His son Jovan, who was born on June 21, 1863, became Archimandrite Sebastian Dabovich, the first native American priest of the Serbian Eastern Orthodox Church, and the first head of the Serbian Eastern Orthodox Mission in America. He started the move to build the St. Sava Church in Jackson, Amador County, California, and served as its first priest.

Amador County Serbs organized the "St. Sava Church Organization" of Amador County in 1886-887. These early societies provided many services to their members and the community. They tended the ill; gave help to the aged; and provided burial services for the deceased. They organized celebrations on St. Sava's Day, the Patron Saint of Serbia (Savin Dan) and St. Vitus Day (Vidov Dan), the day of the Battle of Kossovo, 1389. They met to listen to famous guslars, to sing their cherished songs, and to dance the Kolo. The members of the "St. Sava Church Organization" of Amador County played a major role in the building of St. Sava Church in Jackson. The members of this organization later formed the St. Sava Benevolent Society of Amador County in 1902.

*"Slavonians" as used in Amador County includes Serbians, Bosnians, Montenegrins, Dalmatians, Slovenes, Herzegovinans, Croats, etc., i.e., Yugoslavs.

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The early Serb pioneers of California did not have a church of their own, nor did they have a cemetery. These early pioneers were buried in city cemeteries or in Protestant cemeteries. Later when Serbian Orthodox cemeteries became available, some were reburied in their own consecrated plot of their "Domovina" their little bit of Serbia.

In December, 1893, Father Sebastian Dabovich came to Jackson to Baptize Milosh Dragolovich's infant son, Danilo. It was at this ceremony that Father Dabovich urged the Serbs to build a church in Jackson. The response was spontaneous. Within a month the finance committee under the leadership of Joko Skulich and Tripo Vasiljevich raised enough money to purchase land and to start construction of the church. On January 11, 1894, land was purchased from Samuel W. Bright and his wife for Two Hundred Dollars in gold coin. Soon after this purchase, a church building and a parsonage were started. The cemetery was laid out in 1894, after which date deceased members of the church were and continue to be buried.

The support for the building of the Sava Church came from the entire community, from Serbs and non-Serbs alike. Special mention should be made of the help given to the Serbs by William F. Detert. He helped persuade Samuel W. Bright to sell the property to the church without any restrictions. William F. Detert was the major owner of the prosperous Ziele Mining Company, where many Serbs worked. He also helped with generous monetary contributions. It is also remembered that Chris Marelia, a Dalmatian, gave his time, effort, and money to this project. Many other prominent businessmen helped and gave encouragement. Without exception, all the local religious organizations gave added encouragement and financial support. Because this is America, and because of the support of their American friends, the founders of our church honored America and all Americans by placing the American star on the steeple of the church.

The construction of the church started early in 1894. The bell, cast for St. Sava Church in Jackson, was presented to the church by the Russian Bishop, the Rt. Reverend Nikola. It was hung in the original, onion-shaped, wooden belfry on August 22, 1894. In all likelihood it was rung for the first time on that date. On the bell are inscribed the words: "WITH THE BLESSING OF HIS EMINENCE, RT. REV. NIKOLAS, BISHOP OF ALASKA AND THE ALEUTIAN ISLANDS."

A contractor was hired to build the church, but he got most of his help from the members. It is a mystery where they, the members, found time, for in those days they had to work at their regular jobs for 12 hours a day, 6 days a week. They had to work six or seven days a week in order to subsist on their wages of \$2.50 a day. But, in spite of these hardships, they did much work on the church as well as contributing to it financially.

Who were they? Who built this church? Who saved it for us? Our church begins with St. Sava and it is St. Sava's Eastern Orthodox Church (Svetosavska Pravoslavna Crkva). His brilliant organization of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the 13th century is the reason why our church has survived the vicissitudes and tragedies of the past 765 years. In the 20th century, his disciple Archimandrite Sebastian Dabovich was the motivator to build the St. Sava Church in Jackson, Amador County, California. He helped save the church property for the members by testifying as a witness in court during a litigation in 1923. There cannot be a church without members, and the members of the St. Sava Church in Jackson have supported it faithfully and with diligence for the past 90 years. There are, however, certain members who stand out and deserve special mention. Among these are the stalwart Serbs who built the church and saw it consecrated before a large gathering of people on December 4, 1894. They were:

Father Sebastian Dabovich
Milosh Dragolovich
Nikola Dragolovich
Joko Skulich
Tripo Vasiljevich
Savo Lakonich

Savo Savich
Andrija Vukovich
Micho Curilich
Todor Curilich
Risto Curilich
Tripo Curilich

Trifko Curilich
Panto Kojovich
Simo Dragomanovich
Petar Obradovich
Scepan Dragomanovich

These people built the church, but the success of any enterprise depends on its maintenance. For the past 100 years, the Church of St. Sava in Jackson has had priests, officers, and members that were, and are, courageous, competent, industrious, and tenacious. When the security of the church was threatened in 1923, they, with the help of their attorney, Tom Negrich, and testimony from Father Sebastian Dabovich and other witnesses, speedily had the original trustees, the cause of their difficulty, discharged. They appointed new trustees, a responsibility they gladly accepted. The men who became trustees of the church property in 1923 were:

Mitchell Banicevich
Petar Bakoch
George Bakoch
Lazar Church

Nick Perovich
Micho Curilich
Jakov Milojevich
John Chorovich

Risto Prentovich
Nikola Zlvkovich
Vaso Zerdo

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Manasija, one of the most beautiful monasteries in Serbia, had massive walls built around it to protect it from the onslaught of the Turks. Manasija was constructed after Kosovo Polje (1389) by Stefan Lazarevich. In the "Old Country" (Stari Kraj), during this time, churches were often built in protected places; some were built underground, some in caves, or in other secluded places. Very early after the St. Sava Church in Jackson was built, a cypress hedge, with "chempres" (cypress) plants from "Stari Kraj" was planted around the church. The members of the church remembered that churches needed protection. This hedge eventually grew to the eaves; it was over five feet thick. It was only six feet away from the north and south walls of the church. This hedge introduced a unique landscape architecture to the world, however, it had disadvantages: the roots of the trees were causing damage to nearby structures; the trees required a great amount of care; they produced a large amount of debris; and, they hid the church all too well. The trees, except for four which remain in the front of the church, were removed in 1955.

The architecture of the church is traditional Serbian. Although the exterior is made of bricks, from the Gordon Kilns in Jackson, they are painted over with white paint, which gives the church the appearance of the traditional small church in "Stari Kraj." The narthex is on the west, and the apse is on the east as has always been the custom. The interior of the church conforms to the same plan of many smaller Serbian churches—icons on the walls, stained glass windows, the Ikonostasis, a nave without pews (recently added), candleholders, and chandeliers.

Soon after the church property was purchased in 1894, a parsonage was constructed north of the church. For many years the parsonage was used as a residence by priests. After the late 1920s it was no longer used by priests, so it was rented to secular persons. Among the families that rented the house at different times, were the Radovich family, the Matich family, and the family of Fred LeFevre. Many of us remember these families as friends and relatives and we are happy to say that the parsonage house served a useful purpose during its entire existence. In 1952, a more urgent need existed for the land upon which the house stood. One suggestion was that the house be moved to the church property in Sutter Creek. (They later found out that the church did not own this property.) Ilija Evezich suggested that the house be torn down and the lumber salvaged from it to be used for forms to build a foundation of a new building. This was based on the advice of Lazo Curilich, a member of the church and a master carpenter. His studies showed that it would be cheaper to build a new social hall out of cement blocks than to move the house. Fortunately, the Opstina (congregation) had purchased lots adjoining the church property to the north in 1947 from the Kennedy Mining Company, an excellent place to build a new hall.

Dan Vukajlovich in March, 1954, presented the building plans of George Pejakovich, a building contractor from Sacramento, for approval. It was decided on November 7, 1954, that members Curilich and Nikcevic were to start immediately on the new building. Lazo Curilich suggested that it would be better to draw up new building plans. It is assumed that up to this time George Pejakovich's plans were seriously considered, but for reasons of economy, and because local help would be used, other plans were called for. Savo Popovich of Sutter Creek said: "We must start right now and do most of the work ourselves."

It was more than a coincidence that the new Svestenik (Priest), Proto Milovan P. Shundich, arrived at this church in August, 1954, and the new building project started to speed up. It was Proto Shundich who suggested establishing three committees: a building, financial, and collection committee. Dan Vukajlovich got the building fund established.

Proto Shundich announced that he had received many pledges of financial contributions from throughout the county for the new social hall but that the contributors wanted to see some progress on the building before they sent any money. This was announced on March 27, 1955, and this date can probably be considered as the date on which the new hall was started. In fact, a hall was started, but after many changes in plans the project turned into a church hall and auditorium. The building was completed in the spring of 1956 and it was officially dedicated on St. Thomas Day, April 18, 1957.

The building committee members were: George Stanisich (Chairman), Savo Popovich, Evo Vasilovich, Damjan Dabovich, and Ilija Evezich. John Cassella was hired as the carpenter. He received help from members of the church who were experienced carpenters: Lazo Curilich, Savo Popovich, Bill Pazin, Simo Spremo, Savo Kolak, and Dan Jaksich, Obren Nikcevic, Savo Prlj, Ilija Evezich, Vaso Danilovich, Joko Boreta, and Melvin Radovich. Others who helped in the planning were Nedjo Vukovich and John Vukovich. This was a Serb project so there is no doubt that all of the members of the church participated in some way.

The chairman of the collection committee, Proto Shundich, and the members of his committee were Mirko Begenesich, Gojko Andrich, George Klaich, and three members from the Kolo Serpski Sestara (KSS). This committee did an excellent job. They raised funds by getting contributions from persons in all the western states and even some of the eastern states.

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Before the Jackson parish had this building, social gatherings were held in various halls and places in the county. Many celebrations were held at the Moose Hall in Jackson, the Italian Picnic Grounds, the Sutter Creek Auditorium, and other places. The work of the men who built this church hall, and the foresight and courage of those men, members of the St. Sava Church, does not pass unrecognized. It can be truly said that they did what had to be done. The famous traditional Serbian drama "Balkanska Tsarica" was presented at the Krabbenoff Hall in the early 1930s.

Slavs throughout their history have ardently and vividly admired their dignified ancestors and their cultural legacy. It was not difficult for the Serbs, a South Slav people, to accept Christianity, for they learned a long time ago that there is more beauty in simple faith than there is in vainglorious wit or wisdom; there were times when wit failed, and they came into moments when they would have died of broken hearts if there were no God. It has been mentioned that the Slavs were Christian even before they had heard the Gospel from St. Cyril and St. Methodius; they loved God with all their heart and soul, and they loved their neighbor as themselves. The Vatican archives have records of one of the first declarations of the South Slavs in their new homeland in the sixth century; this was during the papacy of Agtho, and the reign of Emperor Heraclius. This declaration states: "We will not go beyond the borders of our lands to engage in warfare with any nation that desires to live in peace." They were indeed brotherly toward their neighbors, but unfortunately, not among themselves. The Turks observed that if the men who crossed themselves with three fingers could agree among themselves, they would rule the world.

The Serbian people and the Serbs withstood the attrition of the Turkish inroads for centuries; they never wavered in their adherence to the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Christian religion. The guslars and monks kept the Serb spirit alive.

Historians say that the Turks completely subdued the Serbian people. The fact is that the Turks invaded the Serbian lands, but the Serbs have never been subdued. In our church we have, very carefully protected in a glass case, a flag given to the church by King Nikola of Crna Gora in the year 1894. The flag was presented by King Nikola to Nikola Dragolovich who was in Crna Gora at the time and accepted it for the new St. Sava Church at Jackson. This flag is symbolic of the eternal Serb freedom. Our church and our cemetery remind us of Vladika Danilo's prophecy and admonition:

"We must uphold our Honor and our Name,
All unremitting though that strife endure!
Let come those things men thought could never be;
Let Hell devour; let Satan swing his scythe,
Still graveyard turf shall bring forth many a flower,
For coming kindreds in Times later Hour!"

(From The Mountain Wreath by P. P. Njegosh, translation by James W. Wiles.)

Seven hundred years ago, and half-way around the world, our forefathers were of the same mind as our American patriots of 1776. We are the flowers that grow on their graves. The preamble of our constitution resounds the words of Vladika Danilo "...secure the blessings of liberty and justice for ourselves and our posterity ..."

God, Bless America. God, Bless this 100th Anniversary Celebration of the Serbian Orthodox Church in America, and the Saint Sava Serbian Orthodox Church of Jackson, California.

By Ralph Milanovich