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FORT ROSS, CALIFORNIA:

A HISTORICAL SYNOPSIS

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PREFACE

The Russian occupants of Fort Ross comprised one of several groups of people to come to the Sonoma Coast. The Kashia Pomo Indians, the area's first inhabitants, lived close to the site of the fort for centuries, and their descendants still live nearby. During the sixteenth century, Englishmen and Spaniards explored and claimed the northern California coast. When the Russians built Fort Ross in 1812, however, they founded California's first significant European settlement north of San Francisco.

Because Ross was the only substantial, permanent outpost of the Russian Empire ever established in California, Fort Ross will be interpreted from the Russians' perspective. Colony Ross marked the southernmost point of Russian expansion in North America and the culmination of two and a half centuries of Russian movement eastward from Europe. Accompanied by their otter-hunting Aleut servants, the Russians stayed for twenty-nine years, using Ross as a fur-hunting, agricultural, trade, and ship-building base before selling their property to John Augustus Sutter in 1841. After that date the site was privately owned and was used primarily for ranching and lumbering until 1906, when the State of California obtained it for a Historical Landmark. In 1962 the fort became a State Historic Park.

I. RUSSIA MOVES EAST

Russian expansion into North America in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was the farthest phase of a protracted movement eastward begun by Moscow in the mid-sixteenth century. Between the 1580's and 1630's, Russian pioneers seeking furs crossed Siberia and reached the Pacific Ocean near Okhotsk. By 1706 the Russians had taken the Kamchatka Peninsula northeast of Japan. Shortly before Tsar Peter the Great's death in 1725, the Russian ruler sent the Danish explorer Vitus Bering to determine whether America and Asia were connected by land. During 1728 Bering explored the strait named for him. On a second voyage in 1741, Bering discovered the Aleutian Islands and the Alaskan mainland. Although the famous navigator died during the expedition, the trip's survivors returned home with valuable sea otter furs. Because the sea otter population was declining in Russian waters, this treasure in pelts stimulated Russia's movement eastward. Accordingly, the first permanent Russian settlement in North America was established on Alaska's Kodiak Island, where Gregory Shelikhov founded a hunting base in 1784. By 1790 Shelikhov was considering extending Russia's claims as far south as California.¹

¹Chevigny, 9-62; Haase, 2, 96; Gibson, Imperial Russia, vii, 6, 56; Watrous, 4; Makarova, 33-34, 36; Crandall, 2-4; Ilyin, "History of Fort Ross," 1; Ilyin, "Russian-America", 1-4. For a useful map of Russia's advance across Siberia, see Gibson, Imperial Russia, 58.

II. ORGANIZATION OF THE RUSSIAN AMERICAN COMPANY

Although Shelikhov died in 1795, his enterprise gave rise to the Russian-American Company, chartered by Tsar Paul I in 1799 and awarded a monopoly over Russian activity in America. Alexander Baranov, the company's first Chief Manager, ably directed the affairs of Russian America until 1818. From Sitka, established as the region's capital in 1804 and known to the Russians as New Archangel, Baranov presided over the expansion of Russian interests in Alaska, California, and even, for a few years, Hawaii. The Russian-American Company, which in fact represented the authority of the Russian government in the New World, was even granted its own flag by Tsar Alexander I in 1806. A replica of the flag flies over Fort Ross today.²

²Gibson, Imperial Russia, 4-5, 10, 142-144; Fedorova, 130-131; Khlebnikov, Baranov, 107; Fedorova and Colwell, 27; Watrous, 4; Crandall, 4-5. The preamble of the Ukase granting the Russian-American Company charter can be found in Taylor, 113.

III. THE FUR RUSH SOUTH

When the Alaskan sea otter population declined because of over-hunting, the Russians looked to California's otter-rich waters. In 1803, Baranov contracted with a New England sea captain, Joseph O'Cain, to divide the proceeds of the first joint Russian-American hunting expedition to California. Baranov furnished the Aleut hunters, and the Yankee provided the transportation with his vessel, the O'Cain. The O'Cain's spearmen netted eleven hundred furs, turning half over to the Russians in early 1804. During the next decade, Americans and Russians often joined in hunting ventures, generally splitting the catch of sea otters evenly. In these expeditions, the Yankees provided the supplies essential to a Russian enterprise so far afield. At the same time, the Russians were crucial to the Americans, for the Russian-American Company controlled the Aleuts, the region's only skillful sea-otter hunters. Without the Russians providing the Aleuts, the Americans could not have hunted sea-otters successfully.³

³Gibson, Imperial Russia, 13; Haase, 3; Ogden, "Russian Sea-Otter", 217-226; Ogden, California Sea Otter Trade, 45-57; Watrous, 5.

IV. TO CALIFORNIA FOR SUPPLIES

Because of the tremendous difficulty in transporting supplies from Siberia and cultivating supplementary crops in Alaska, the Russians began looking to California for agricultural products as well as furs. In 1805, when Nicholas Rezanov arrived at Sitka on a Russian-American Company inspection tour, he found the colony short of food and afflicted by scurvy. With famine threatening Sitka in 1806, Rezanov sailed to San Francisco aboard the schooner Juno to seek emergency provisions. Diplomatically maneuvering around Spanish regulations against trade with foreigners, Rezanov concluded an agreement for trade and, in one of the most famous romances of California history, became engaged to Concepcion Arguello, the daughter of the Spanish commander. Rezanov not only provided relief for Sitka, but also recommended that Russia establish an agricultural supply point and hunting base on the Northern California coast, which the English explorer Sir Francis Drake had called "New Albion". After falling from a horse while crossing Siberia en route to St. Petersburg, the Russian inspector died in 1807 before his scheme could be realized.⁴

⁴Khlebnikov, Baranov, 59; Haase, 3-5; Essig, 191; Chevigny, 116-224; Gibson, Imperial Russia, 113, 153-154, 175-178; Watrous, 3, 5; Crandall, 5-10; Taylor, 115-119; Wood, 29-32.

V. THE FOUNDING OF FORT ROSS

Determined to implement Rezenov's ideas, Baranov sent his assistant, Ivan A. Kuskov, on a series of exploring and hunting trips to Northern California during 1808-1811. Kuskov, who eventually became the first commander at Fort Ross, was initially interested in Bodega Bay--he called it Port Rummyantsev--where the first Russian-American Company structure was built in 1809. Finally, however, Kuskov picked the present site of the fort for the Russians' principal settlement because of its superior soil, timber, pasture land, water supply, and defensibility, and its greater distance from the Spanish authorities in San Francisco. Accompanied by twenty-five Russians and eighty Aleuts, Kuskov began construction of the fort in March 1812 on a bluff 110 feet above the ocean beach. The redwood stronghold, called Slavyansk, or "Ross", by Kuskov ("Ross" is an old form of the word Rossia, meaning Russia), was dedicated at the end of the summer but was not completed for many more months. By 1817 the stockade wall accommodated a pair of two-story blockhouses, several cannons, a commander's house, some barracks and storage facilities, an office, a well, a bell tower, and a flag pole. Outside the main fort, a windmill, a shipyard, a bathhouse, a smithy, a cemetery, some gardens, and some animal shelters completed the complex. Forming the nucleus of Russian California, "Colony Ross", as the Russians called it, came to extend approximately eight miles inland between Cape Mendocino and Cape Drake, and included Port Rummyantsev and several farms. During the summer months, the Russians also stationed a hunting party on the Farallon Islands some thirty miles beyond the Golden Gate.⁵

⁵Thomas, 35; Thompson, 11-12; Smith, 15-18; Fedorova, 135, 203, 358-359; Essig, 189, 191-193; Greene, 5; Haase, 7-8; Khlebnikov, Colonial Russian America, 107-108; Crandall, 10-12; Watrous, 5-6; Gibson, Imperial Russia, 113-115. For maps of Colony Ross, see Gibson, Imperial Russia, 114; Blomkvist, 104. Probably the most dramatic early map of the fort itself will be found in Fedorova, Illustration 13, "Map of Fort Ross Area, 1817".

VI. RUSSIAN - KASHIA POMO INDIAN CONTACT

Kuskov selected the site of an old Southwestern (Kashia) Pomo Indian village called Meteni, or Mad-shui-nui, as the most suitable strategic location for Fort Ross. The Kashia Pomo, masterful basket-makers, occupied the coast and hills from the mouth of the Gualala River to a point below the mouth of the Russian River. With the arrival of Kuskov, the Pomo near the fort, who called themselves Chwachamaju, resettled beyond the stockade area, probably in conical structures made of vertical poles covered with slabs of redwood bark. In 1817 the Russian claim to Fort Ross was formalized by an exchange of gifts and the signing of a deed of cession by several Indian leaders. The Russians not only provided trade items and employment but also, the Indians felt, constituted a buffer against the advance of Spanish colonization. Surprisingly cordial much of the time, Russian-Pomo relations were occasionally troubled. Because Russian discipline was sometimes stern and remuneration for work sometimes meager, by the early 1830's it was difficult for the Russians to secure Indian laborers. Visiting the fort in 1833, Ferdinand Wrangel, the Governor of Russian-America, reported that during his stay the overseers at Colony Ross had rounded up reluctant Indians, tied their hands, driven them to the Russian settlement, and forced them to work the grain harvest. Nonetheless, Russian-Pomo relations were sufficiently harmonious that Russians often stayed overnight among the Indians. Commander Kuskov's wife, Katherina, learned the Pomo language, acted as an interpreter, and taught Russian to the Indian children. As time passed, the Kashia Pomo incorporated dozens of Russian words into the vocabulary of their own language.⁶

⁶Kroeber, Handbook, 234; Smith, 4, 13-14, 19; Gibson, Imperial Russia, 119, 128, 130; Gibson, "Russia in California, 1833", 210-211; S. F. Cook, 562; Pontiatowski, 145, 150; Crandall, 11; Sanderlin, 96. For rich discussions of the Pomo Indians' civilization and material culture, see Kroeber, Handbook, 222-271; Kroeber, "California Basketry", 319, 331; Barrett, 1-332; Kniffen, 353-400.

VII. PROMYSHLENNIKI, ALEUTS AND OTTERS

The Russian hunting supervisors were called promyshlenniki, which, roughly translated, means frontiersmen or fur trappers; the term is traceable to an old Novgorod word for freelance exploiters of natural resources. Fort Ross's promyshlenniki depended upon their Kodiak Eskimo and Koniag Indian hunters—usually identified simply as "Aleuts" in contemporary documents—who had been brought to California from Kodiak Island in Alaska. The Aleuts lived in their own redwood plank houses outside of the fort's stockade walls. Among the world's greatest small-boat hunters, these people pursued sea otter, seal, and sea lion in their baidarkas, or two-man skin-covered kayaks, of which forty were brought from Alaska in 1812. Tireless and sea-hardened, the Aleuts would wait motionless in the kayaks for ten to twelve hours. They would approach a surfaced otter silently and swiftly and would impale it with a pronged, detachable bone-tipped spear. A wounded otter would dive under water for about twenty minutes, its course marked by a bladder-balloon attached to the spear tip by a cord. When the struggling otter surfaced again for air, it would be dispatched. Such sea-otter hunting was at first profitable to the Russians. During his exploring voyages along the California coast, Kuskov took 1,453 pelts in 1808 and 1,238 in 1811. But between 1812 and 1815 the otter kill declined to only 714 adults and 163 young. In 1820 only 16 prime pelts were taken. By the mid-1820's, sea otter hunting had ceased being a profitable venture at Fort Ross. Thereafter, the Aleuts were often used in lumbering and herding.⁷

⁷Haase, 43-44; Fedorova, 359; Blomkvist, 107; Ilyin, "History of Fort Ross", 1, 28; Ogden, "Russian Sea-Otter", 218; Essig, 194; Khlebnikov, Colonial Russian America, 108; Crandall, 28-39; Watrous, 4, 8; Gibson, Imperial Russia, 32-33; Duhaut-Chilly, 326.

VIII. POPULATION PROFILES AND THE DIVISION OF LABOR

The population of Russian-California varied over time, but rarely included over one hundred Russians or five hundred people in all. After twenty years of Russian occupation, only fifty Russians, seventy-two adult Pomos, eighty-three Aleuts, and eighty-eight "Creoles" (persons of mixed Russian and Aleut or Pomo blood) resided at the fort. At Port Remyantsev, the largest population center outside the fort vicinity, about twenty Russians and fifty Aleuts were stationed during the early days. Very few Russian women and children resided at Colony Ross. In 1833 only about four adult Russian-born females and five Russian children lived at the fort. The largest group of adult females consisted of Pomo wives, several of whom were married to Russians and Aleuts.

The division of labor at Ross was quite clear. While the Aleut men served chiefly as hunters, especially in the early years, the Russians and Creoles acted mainly as guards, overseers, artisans, and cooks. The Pomos--both men and women--performed most of the colony's agricultural labor. With expanded cultivation, the number of Pomos in the fort's vicinity increased, the Russians employing one hundred Pomo agricultural workers in 1825, one hundred fifty in 1833, and two hundred in 1835.

The constant shortage of labor at the sparsely-populated frontier colony was often aggravated by desertion and disease. The Russian-American Company imported some Russians described in the documents as "riff-raff" and criminals. Desertion among these employees was always a threat. Disease could hamper operations badly, as it did in 1828, when twenty-nine Creoles and Aleuts died of measles. Five years later an infection incapacitated most of the fort's personnel and killed many Pomos.⁸

⁸Gibson, *Imperial Russia*, 12, 115, 119-120, 127-130; Gibson, "Russia in California, 1833", 210-211; Blomkvist, 112; Essig, 196; Fedorova, 208, 328; Watrous, 6-7. For drawings of people at Fort Ross done by Iliá Gavrilovich Voznesenskii in 1841, see Blomkvist, 109-114.

IX. GRAIN PRODUCTION

Agriculture became a leading activity at Colony Ross with the decline of otter hunting. From the beginning of their settlement in California, the Russians hoped grain production at Ross would supply Russian-Alaska with needed food. Unfortunately for the Russians, the amount of grain sent north was neither consistent nor sufficient. With few experienced farmers--the Russian system of serfdom kept most of the nation's peasants tied to the land at home--the colony failed to rotate crops or to fertilize fields. The arable land along this rugged coastal region was not particularly abundant or fertile, and the ocean fog frequently caused stem rust, which could ruin an entire crop. For a long time Ross did not even have an efficient method for threshing. During their first few seasons in California, the Russians had to depend upon the Spanish for grain and seed. Even in later years the residents of Colony Ross were often compelled to trade manufactured goods to the Spanish and Mexicans for supplemental grain to ship to the Russian-American Company's Alaskan outposts. Still, agriculture did expand significantly in the 1820's and early 1830's, yielding good wheat and barley crops in 1828 and 1832. During the latter year Fort Ross was able to send one-quarter of its bumper wheat yield to Sitka. Although from 1826 through 1833 Ross exported 4,000 bushels of grain to Alaska, this still fulfilled only one-twelfth of the Russian-American Company's needs; and in 1835, 1836, and 1837 Russian California experienced serious crop failures. Fort Ross never succeeded in becoming an important bread basket for the Russian-American Company.⁹

⁹Smith, 25-26; Essig, 195; Haase, 72-75; Okun, 141; Watrous, 10; Gibson, *Imperial Russia*, 115-122, 131-137; Gibson, "Two New Chernykh Letters", Summer 1968, 48-56, Fall 1968, 59; Chernykh, 16, 22-26; Crandall, 30-31.

X. LIVESTOCK

Russian agriculture at Colony Ross was hardly limited to wheat and barley production. Among the extensive and varied supplemental farming activities undertaken by the Russians, stock raising was probably the most important. As early as 1813 the Spanish brought twenty cattle and three horses to Fort Ross. Over the next three decades the cattle, horse, mule, and sheep population at Ross increased substantially. Although a serious epidemic during 1823-1826 killed many animals, stock numbers doubled after 1833 with the opening of new Russian ranchos inland from the fort. Becoming Russian America's leading stock breeders, the residents of Colony Ross produced beef, butter, tallow, hides, mutton, and sheep's wool, and even sent moderate shipments of salted beef to Alaska in the late 1830's. An 1841 inventory listed seventeen hundred cattle, nine hundred forty horses and mules, and nine hundred sheep in the Russian settlement on the eve of its closing. Pigs, goats, chickens, turkeys, ducks, and geese were also raised at Fort Ross. But because of limited pasture land and over-slaughtering, Russian stock raising at Ross remained only marginally successful. The Russians always had far fewer animals than the Spanish and Mexican Californians. In 1838 the Mexican General Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo, for example, had ten thousand cattle and approximately five thousand horses on his Petaluma rancho alone.¹⁰

¹⁰Khlebnikov, *Colonial Russian America*, 119; Gibson, *Imperial Russia*, 123-125, 133-134; Gibson, "Russia in California, 1833", 209; Haase, 76-79; Watrous, 11; DuFour, 260. Stock pens are shown on the 1817 map of Fort Ross. See Fedorova, Illustration 13, "Map of Fort Ross Area, 1817," and Fedorova, 359.

XI. VEGETABLES AND FRUITS

Vegetable gardening and fruit growing, though smaller in scale, succeeded rather better than grain production and stock raising at Colony Ross. While there were substantial vegetable shipments to Alaska in good years, most of the Russians' produce was grown in private plots for local consumption. Many vegetables survived the year around and could be double cropped, some species reproducing in great abundance and yielding remarkably large specimens. Commander Kuskov's extensive gardens included potatoes, carrots, onions, garlic, radishes, beets, turnips, lettuce, cabbage, peas, beans, muskmelons, watermelons, grapes, pumpkins, and horseradishes. Employing a great variety of harrows, plows, carts, and other equipment--as the 1841 inventory discloses--the Russians also cultivated corn, oats, and tobacco. To supplement the vegetables, the Russians planted a number of fruit trees near the fort, many of which remained productive into the twentieth century. The first specimen, a peach tree imported from San Francisco in 1814, bore fruit after six years. In 1818 new peach trees were introduced from Monterey, and two years later one hundred apple, pear, cherry, peach, and bergamot seedlings were added. These trees produced fruit by 1828. Grapes were being harvested six years after vines from Lima, Peru, were set in 1817. By 1833 Fort Ross had four hundred trees and seven hundred vine stalks, and, shortly before the Russian departure, the Chernykh Rancho located nearby had two thousand vines. The Russian inventory of 1841 listed two hundred seven apple trees, twenty-nine peach trees, ten pear trees, ten quince trees, and eight cherry trees as growing in the fort's orchard. In good years Russian California produced a surplus of fruit.¹¹

¹¹Khlebnikov, Colonial Russian America, 121; DuFour, 258-259; Essig, 193, 204-206; Haase, 69-71, 74-76; Gibson, Imperial Russia, 122-123; Chernykh, 16-22; Dunbar, n.p.; Watrous, 10-12; Crandall, 30-31. For dramatic quotes describing the large, abundant vegetables grown at Ross, see Gibson, Imperial Russia, 122-123.

XII. SHIPBUILDING AND OTHER ACTIVITY

Shipbuilding assumed central importance at Ross with the decline of otter hunting. The first seaworthy vessels launched in California were constructed by the Russians at Fort Ross Cove. Alexander Baranov, the Russian-American Company's Chief Manager, dispatched shipwright Vasily Grudinin from Alaska to oversee construction. Four two-masted ships were completed during 1818-1824: the 160-ton brig-schooner Rumyantsev, the 200-ton brig Buldakov, the 160-ton brig Volga, and the 200-ton brig Kyakhta. For a short time these vessels ranged from San Pedro in southern California to Okhotsk in Siberia. Unfortunately, because the ships were made largely of improperly seasoned Tanbark Oak, which was poorly suited to ocean-going vessels in any case, rot made all four ships unfit for sea duty within six years of construction. This disaster caused the Russians to discontinue major vessel shipbuilding after 1824. Thereafter, the Fort Ross commanders encouraged agricultural expansion to absorb the colonists' energies. The Russians also made skiffs, longboats, rowboats, and barges, several of which were traded or sold to the Mexicans at the Bay Area missions in the middle 1820's. Manufacturing for trade with the Spanish and Mexican Californians--as well as for local use and for export to Alaska--carried far beyond ship and boat construction to include a wide range of activities, such as barrel, tar, brick, leather, boot, wool, flour, furniture, candle, soap, and possibly pot making.¹²

¹²Khlebnikov, Colonial Russian America, 116-117, 128; Essig, 194-195; Gibson, "Two New Chernykh Letters", Summer 1968, 52, Fall 1968, 58-59; Gibson, Imperial Russia, 116, 188; Haase, 82-83, 89-90; Watrous, 9, 13; Andrews, 7-8; Smith, 27-28.

XIII. COMMERCIAL AND DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS WITH SPAIN AND MEXICO

Concern about possible Russian expansion was among several considerations moving the Spanish to found the first California missions at San Diego and Monterey in 1769-1770 and the Mexicans to establish the last California missions at San Rafael and Sonoma in 1817 and 1823. Spanish and Mexican officials frequently questioned the Russians' right to maintain a base along the Sonoma coast. Although Russia's diplomats never achieved official recognition of Colony Ross from Madrid or Mexico City, however, the Russians maintained agreeable commercial relations with their Spanish and Mexican neighbors because trade benefited everyone on the northern California frontier. Even in the early years of Russian settlement in California, when Spanish regulations deemed commerce with foreigners illegal, California's Russians and Spaniards carried on a lively contraband trade.

In 1816 Spain lifted its ban on colonial trade with foreigners, although local authorities limited the amount of Spanish-Russian commerce officially allowed in California ports. Trade with the Spanish became so important to the Russians that in 1820 they seriously considered abandoning Fort Ross in exchange for a formal commercial agreement guaranteeing a steady supply of provisions for Alaska, but Spain rejected all Russian overtures for such a pact. Finally in 1821, when Mexico became independent of Spain, Alta California opened its ports to unrestricted foreign trade. At first pleased with this development, the Russians soon faced higher tariffs as well as stiff competition from increasing numbers of American and British trading vessels visiting

Mexican California's ports. Also, after the secularization of the California missions in 1833, far less Mexican wheat and beef was available for purchase.

Besides trading with the Californios, the Russians concluded a renewable hunting contract with the Mexican authorities in 1823 which enabled them to seek otters as far south as San Diego and to trade pelts for Mexican grain. After the Mexican governor of California terminated the contract in 1831, however, the Russians could legally hunt only as employees of Mexican entrepreneurs. Although very important to the Russians, commercial relations with the Spanish and Mexicans never completely fulfilled Russian hopes in California.¹³

¹³Hutchinson, vii-viii, 1-42, 98-105, 140-141, 177-180, 380-381; Gibson, Imperial Russia, 117, 180-195; Taylor, 109-110, 122-127; Haase, 89; Ogden, "Russian Sea-Otter", 234-239; Tays, 107, 109-110; Smith, 26-30; Watrous, 8, 23; Sanderlin, 81. For a vivid description of Russian sailors and a Russian trading vessel from Alaska anchored at Yerba Buena to take on a supply of tallow and grain in 1840, see Richard Henry Dana, ch. 26, 217-218 of the Doubleday edition.

XIV. WORLD AFFAIRS AND THE INTERNATIONAL LEGALITY OF FORT ROSS

The Tsar's officials never achieved international recognition of Russian California from any other major power. In 1819 Russian hopes for worldwide sanction of Colony Ross were badly damaged by the Adams-Onís treaty, by which Spain and the United States formally acknowledged Spanish possession of all land below the Oregon country border. Although the Russians in Alaska periodically traded for provisions with the British and Americans and sometimes entered into joint business ventures with the latter, the Anglo-American powers saw no reason to recognize Colony Ross, especially after 1819, because Russian aims also competed with British and American economic and strategic interests in the Pacific. The nearly overextended Russians never tried to enforce their claim on the Pacific Coast below Alaska after Tsar Alexander I issued an imperial ukase in September 1821, unilaterally expanding the Russian-American Company's exclusive rights in the northwest into the Oregon country, then jointly claimed by the United States and Britain. American President James Monroe, however, seized upon this appearance of a Russian expansionist threat to rally support for his hemispheric non-colonization principle, embodied in his famous doctrine of 1823. By 1824, no closer than before to achieving international recognition of its California claim, Russia abandoned its expansionist pretensions in North America by agreeing to a Russo-American Convention withdrawing Russia's claims to the Oregon country. The Russians signed a similar treaty with the British in 1825. These agreements denied the Russians future land access between Alaska and Russian California, and left the legal status of Fort Ross unresolved. A final opportunity for international sanction arose in the mid-1830's when the Mexican government invited Ferdinand P. Wrangel, Chief Manager of the Russian colonies in America, to mediate in

establishing diplomatic relations between Mexico and Russia. Wrangel hoped to convince the Mexicans to cede a small amount of arable land east of Colony Ross to the Russian-American Company, because, with Mexican grain and beef becoming scarce following secularization of the California missions, he favored increased Russian cultivation. Traveling to Mexico, Wrangel found the officials there prepared to confirm Russian claims to Ross, but ultimately nothing came of his efforts because the conservative Tsar Nicholas I refused to recognize the Mexican Republic, which he identified with revolution. The last serious Russian effort to achieve international recognition for Fort Ross was thus defeated by the Russian Tsar himself.¹⁴

¹⁴DeConde, 127-129, 133-134, 140-143; Okum, 140; Nichols, 13-26; Hutchinson, 381-382; Shur and Gibson, 51-52; DuPour, 243-244; Gibson, Imperial Russia, 153-173, 199-208; Gibson, "Russia in California, 1833", 214-215; Watrous, 23; Pontiatowski, 153-154; Khlebnikov, Colonial Russian America, 130-131.

XV. RUSSIAN EXPLORERS AND SCIENTISTS

An impressive number of Russian explorers and scientists visited Northern California during the early nineteenth century. Ivan Kuskov, the first Russian to explore inland from the Sonoma Coast, journeyed fifty miles up the Russian River in 1811 and gave the river its Russian name, Slavyanka. Russians also traveled to Humboldt and Arcata Bays, up the Sacramento River, and overland to Clear Lake. In 1823-1824 the Russian naval officer Dmitry Zavalishin toured the Calaveras, Mariposa, and Sacramento Valleys. Ferdinand Wrangel surveyed the Santa Rosa plain in 1833 when contemplating the expansion of Russian agriculture. Eight years later a Russian expedition to the same region named and mapped several local tributaries of the Russian river. Finally, a Russian climbing party, including Yegor Chernykh, who was a Colony Ross agronomist and rancher, and Ilya Gavrilovich Voznesenskii made the first recorded ascent of Mount St. Helena in 1841. The climbers left a metal plate at the north summit as proof of their accomplishment. Although the original plate was removed by an American twelve years later, a facsimile was erected in 1912 to commemorate the one hundredth anniversary of Fort Ross.

Russian scientists did much field work in northern California. They were the first Europeans to conduct serious studies in Sonoma Coast botany, zoology, entomology, and ethnology. The naturalist Georg H. von Langsdorff accompanied Rezanov to California in 1806, gathering plant and animal specimens which were added to museum collections in St. Petersburg. In 1816, while on his first voyage around the world, Otto von Kotzebue brought the naturalist Adelbert von Chamisso and the entomologist and zoologist Johann Friedrich Eschscholtz to California. During a short stay in

San Francisco, Chamisso collected the now-famous California poppy, naming it Eschscholtzia Californica for his friend and for the new land. Eschscholtz made extensive insect collections at Fort Ross in 1824 while accompanying Kotzebue on a second world tour. Although Wrangel was interested in wildlife, geography, and meteorology, his most important work was probably done in the field of ethnology. In 1833 he conducted the first extensive anthropological study of Indians in the Santa Rosa area. Father Ioann Veniaminov, a missionary who spent many years studying Alaskan Indians, visited Fort Ross in 1836. Finally, while traveling in northern California during 1840-1841, Ilya Voznesenskii, who was a zoologist, botanist, geologist, and ethnologist, produced some of the most informative drawings ever done of the inhabitants of Colony Ross. The numerous accomplishments of Russian explorers and scientists in frontier California deserve our ongoing recognition.¹⁵

¹⁵ Sherwood, 33-35; Blomkvist, 101-115; Shur and Gibson, 48-58; Gibson, "A Russian Orthodox Priest", 57-59; Essig, 196-198, 207-209; Watrous, 22; Thompson, 49-50. The drawings by Voznesenskii are reproduced in Blomkvist, 106-114; Shur and Gibson, 48-50.

XVI. THE FORT ROSS COMMANDERS AND AGRARIAN EXPANSION

The five commanders at Fort Ross during twenty-nine years of Russian occupation in California had in common one important activity--the encouragement of farming. Although the fort's first commander, Ivan Kuskov, assumed hunting was the primary function of Colony Ross and lacked experience as a farmer, he began agriculture and stock raising at the fort. Kuskov's successor, Karl Schmidt, who became commandant at Ross in 1821, attempted to stimulate agricultural expansion by distributing free seed among the Aleut hunters as well as the Russians and Creoles at the settlement. Although Schmidt, a navigator by training, invested much time in the ambitious shipbuilding program of the early 1820's, his efforts in agriculture helped make Colony Ross relatively self-sufficient. Assuming command from Schmidt in the mid-1820's, Paul Shelikhov made significant contributions to the agricultural development of the colony, such as ordering the planting of the last uncultivated arable land near the fort. Peter Kostromitinov, following Shelikhov as commander at the end of the decade, encouraged agriculture even more than his predecessors. Kostromitinov's administration established several new farms (ranchos) in the interior, planted grain along the Russian River in 1831, and may have directed cultivation in the Freestone area eight miles east of Bodega Bay. In 1833 the commander developed another inland farm called Khlebnikov Rancho by the Russians and Three Friends Rancho by the Californios. Kostromitinov also founded Kostromitinov Rancho, or Halfway House, which stood midway between Fort Ross and Bodega Bay. Another farm, labeled New Rancho for a short time, but best recalled as the Chernykh or Jorge Rancho, was put

under cultivation shortly after Alexander Gavrilovich Rotchev, the last Fort Ross commandant, assumed command in the mid-1830's. Encouraged by each Fort Ross commandant since 1812, agriculture had become the primary function of the colony and was being conducted on an extensive scale by the end of the Russian era in California.¹⁶

¹⁶ Gibson, Imperial Russia, 116-118, 125, 129; Essig, 193-194; DuFour, 242, 258-259; Khlebnikov, Colonial Russian America, 117; Crandall, 24-25; Thomas, 9; Del Cioppo, 1-15. For maps of the Russian ranchos near Fort Ross see Duflot de Mofras; Beck and Haase, Plate 40; Fedorova, 137. Care must be taken, however, because the location of the Chernykh rancho remains controversial. See Del Cioppo, 11-13. A drawing of the Chernykh rancho was done by Voznesenskii in 1841. This is the only known drawing of a Russian rancho. Reproductions can be found in Gibson, "Two New Chernykh Letters", Summer 1968, 54-55; Blomkvist, 114. For more information on the interesting rancher Yegor Chernykh, a Moscow Agricultural School Graduate who was stationed at Colony Ross during 1836-1841, see Chernykh, 10-28; Gibson, "Two New Chernykh Letters", Summer 1968, 48-56, Fall 1968, 54-60.

XVII. COMMANDER ROTCHEV, HELENA GAGARIN, AND THE SALE OF THE FORT
TO JOHN A. SUTTER

Despite the extensive agricultural activity near Fort Ross, it was clear by the late 1830's that the colony was a financial liability to the Russian-American Company. Fur hunting had declined with the otter population, shipbuilding had failed outright, stock raising had remained a marginal enterprise, and farming had disappointed Russian expectations after 1835. The company found itself operating the colony at a deficit not compensated for by Ross's benefits as a trading outpost. The collapse of Wrangel's diplomatic efforts ended any possibility that agricultural expansion might rejuvenate the colony. To limit Russian growth, the Mexican government induced its citizens to populate the Sonoma region by awarding land grants, and Mexican and naturalized Yankee settlers just a few miles inland from Fort Ross were encircling the Russians. When the Hudson's Bay Company agreed to provision the Russian-American Company's Alaskan bases, the last reason for retaining Colony Ross disappeared. The Russian-American Company opted to withdraw from California, and Tsar Nicholas I formally sanctioned the decision on April 15, 1839.

Alexander Rotchev, the last commander of Fort Ross, was made responsible for the negotiations leading to the sale of the company's property in California. This arrangement was bitterly ironic, for Rotchev and his wife Helena Gargarin, having come to love Fort Ross, had made it a model of urbane living during the years of their residence. Rotchev had built a new commander's house which included a piano, an impressive library, and imported French wines; and Helena, a princess, according to tradition, who was renowned for her social graces, had cultivated a fine rose garden.

After the first potential buyer of the fort, the Hudson's Bay Company, failed to purchase in 1840, the Russian-American Company instructed Rotchev to approach the Mexicans. Early the next year, Peter Kostromitinov, a former Fort Ross commander then serving as the Russian-American Company's San Francisco agent, assisted Rotchev by negotiating for the sale of the property with the Mexican commandant at Sonoma, Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo. Confident that the Mexican government would acquire the colony at no cost once the Russians left, Vallejo merely offered \$9,000 to buy the livestock. Meanwhile, Kostromitinov and Rotchev found a more interested customer in the Swiss-American pioneer, John Augustus Sutter, who agreed to purchase Russian California's buildings, equipment, weapons, and livestock for \$30,000 in produce and coin. The formal papers were signed December 13, 1841; two weeks later Rotchev and most of the inhabitants of Colony Ross set sail for Alaska. Although Rotchev himself returned to California briefly during the Gold Rush, the evacuation of Fort Ross ended the twenty-nine year "Russian period" in California history.

Besides a schooner and other property at Bodega Bay, Sutter acquired in the stockaded fort itself two turrets, old and new commander's houses, officials' and employees' quarters, storage facilities, a small kitchen, a well, and the famous Fort Ross chapel built in the mid-1820's. Outside the stockade, his inventory included workshops, sheds, kitchens, barns, bathhouses, wooden grain thrashing floors, windmills, orchards, gardens, and even a cemetery with wooden grave markers. Sutter used these acquisitions principally for salvage. He had his employee John Bidwell dismantle much of the Ross property and transport it to Sutter's Fort at New Helvetia, or Sacramento. The passing of Fort Ross into Sutter's hands symbolized

the end of pastoral California, where Russian and Mexican frontier outposts could coexist peacefully, and signified the beginning of a new era of aggressive Northern European and Yankee pioneers.¹⁷

¹⁷Essig, 198-199; DuFour, 240-276; Gibson, *Imperial Russia*, 120, 138-139; Gibson, "Russian in California, 1833", 215; Munro-Fraser, 364-373; Hatch, 54-57; Haase, 16-20; Thomas, 35-37; Smith, 30-31; Julian Dana, 69-74, 116-123; Dunbar, n.p.; Greene, 8, 14; Bidwell, 167-169; Cordes, 97-109; Crandall, 35-36; Watrous, 14-19, 24-25; Sanderlin, 98-99; Ilyin, "History of Fort Ross", 22-24.

XVIII. THE RANCH PERIOD

Fort Ross changed hands several times between 1841 and 1873. William Benitz followed John Bidwell as Sutter's manager at the fort. Benitz and fellow German Ernest Rufus leased the property from Sutter in 1845. That same year, Mexico, legal owner of Ross until 1848, awarded the ground occupied by the fort to Manuel Torres as part of the "Muniz Rancho" land grant. Eventually Benitz acquired both the Torres grant and the Sutter claim to the property. Employing numerous local Indians in his successful stock raising and agricultural operations, Benitz held the complex until 1867, when he sold his holdings to Charles Fairfax. With his partner James Dixon, Fairfax developed an extensive lumbering enterprise at Ross, installing a sawmill and erecting a slide chute in the north cove near the fort for shipping lumber by sea.

In 1874, a year after purchasing the fort and surrounding territory following Fairfax's death, George Washington Call and his Chilean wife Mercedes began a ninety-nine year Call family occupation of the Sonoma

Coast ranch. Call, a pioneer who had come to California in 1852, continued the stock raising, agricultural, and lumbering enterprises started by his predecessors at Fort Ross, and in his early days there prepared dairy products for San Francisco markets. He also replanted the old Russian orchards, maintained a weather station for decades, encouraged road construction, built a school house, and acted as the first Fort Ross postmaster. Ocean shipping from Fort Ross, an activity lasting until the completion of the coast highway in 1925, increased in importance when Call improved the shipping facilities in the north cove. Call himself owned a schooner running between San Francisco and Fort Ross at the turn of the century. While Call was living at the ranch, the thriving coastal community of Fort Ross possessed post and telegraph offices, a weather station, a hotel, a saloon, a meat market, a store, and a blacksmith shop, and it employed many people, including some Chinese residents. George W. Call died in 1907, leaving the ranch to his family. Mrs. Mercedes Call stayed at Fort Ross until her death in 1932. Her son, Carlos Call, operated the ranch until 1971.¹⁸

¹⁸ Essig, 199-201; Thomas, 10; Watrous, 25-27; Hatch, 60-63; Munroe-Fraser, 373-374, 377-378; Ilyin, "History of Fort Ross", 24-25; Smith, 33-38; Dunbar, n.p.; Thompson, 22-24.

XIX. THE PARK PERIOD

In 1903 the recently-formed California Landmarks League acquired the three-acre site of the Fort Ross stockade. The League gained access to the fort when Mr. and Mrs. J. J. Lerman purchased the property from George W. Call and then deeded it to William Randolph Hearst, trustee of the League's Landmarks Fund. Acting for the League, in early 1906 Hearst gave the site to the Board of Sutter's Fort Trustees, the predecessor of the State Parks Commission, and made Fort Ross one of the first historic monuments in California to become public property. Only four weeks after it entered the public domain, the famous earthquake of April 18, 1906, rocked the fort, knocking down the original chapel and badly damaging several other structures. Restoration began with the reconstruction of the chapel in 1916-1917. Unfortunately, the old officials' quarters was torn down for materials to build a new chapel which had one more side window than the original; but during 1954-1956 a more accurate replica of the Russian chapel was erected. Reconstruction of various other items, including the turrets and the stockade walls, has been undertaken over the years. Work to restore and stabilize an original structure, Commander Rotchev's house, was done in the 1920's and 1940's. In 1961-1962, just before Fort Ross became a State Historic Park, the State acquired 353 acres of land around the stockade. Although development of the park received serious setbacks when fire destroyed the entire chapel in 1970 and the roof of the Rotchev house the following year, reconstruction of these edifices, completed in 1974, was made possible through the cooperation of the Russian-American community, the State of California's Department of Parks and Recreation, and various other public and private organizations.¹⁹

¹⁹Essig, 201-203; Watrous, 28-30; Smith, 38-42; McKenzie, 1-16; Ilyin, "History of Fort Ross", 26; Crandall, 38-40; Fort Ross State Historic Park, 8. Stationed at Fort Ross during 1948-1963 and 1972-1976, Park Ranger and Historian John C. McKenzie contributed years of research toward the reconstruction of the Russian colony. His dedication might well be mentioned in interpreting the Park Period. News and Views, 14.

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