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Title: The Old Well Site & the Barracks Building at FRSHP

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FORT ROSS SHP

The Old Well Site

The Barracks Building

Ranger John C. McKenzie was Curator at Fort Ross State Historical Monument for over 16 years and while there spent considerable time learning more about the Fort and its Russian occupants.

Two of the studies made by John, one on the old well and the other on the barracks building, make up this month's supplement.

THE OLD WELL



When the Russian-American Company offered their Colony Ross for sale in 1841, they presented an inventory of their assets to John A. Sutter and General M. G. Vallejo. In both documents a well was mentioned at Fort Ross.

In time the well was filled in and the exact location was forgotten. There developed a series of stories and legends concerning the well, dealing with items and relics said to have been thrown or lost in the old well.

The only positive recent reference to the well which could be found in 1952 was in the work records of the neighboring Call Ranch. This told that the well, some 14 feet deep had been filled in by Mr. Carlos A. Call in 1898. The fill material had been taken from a site a few feet northeast of the old stockade line bounding the original Fort site. The ranch records going back to 1874 made no other mention of this well.

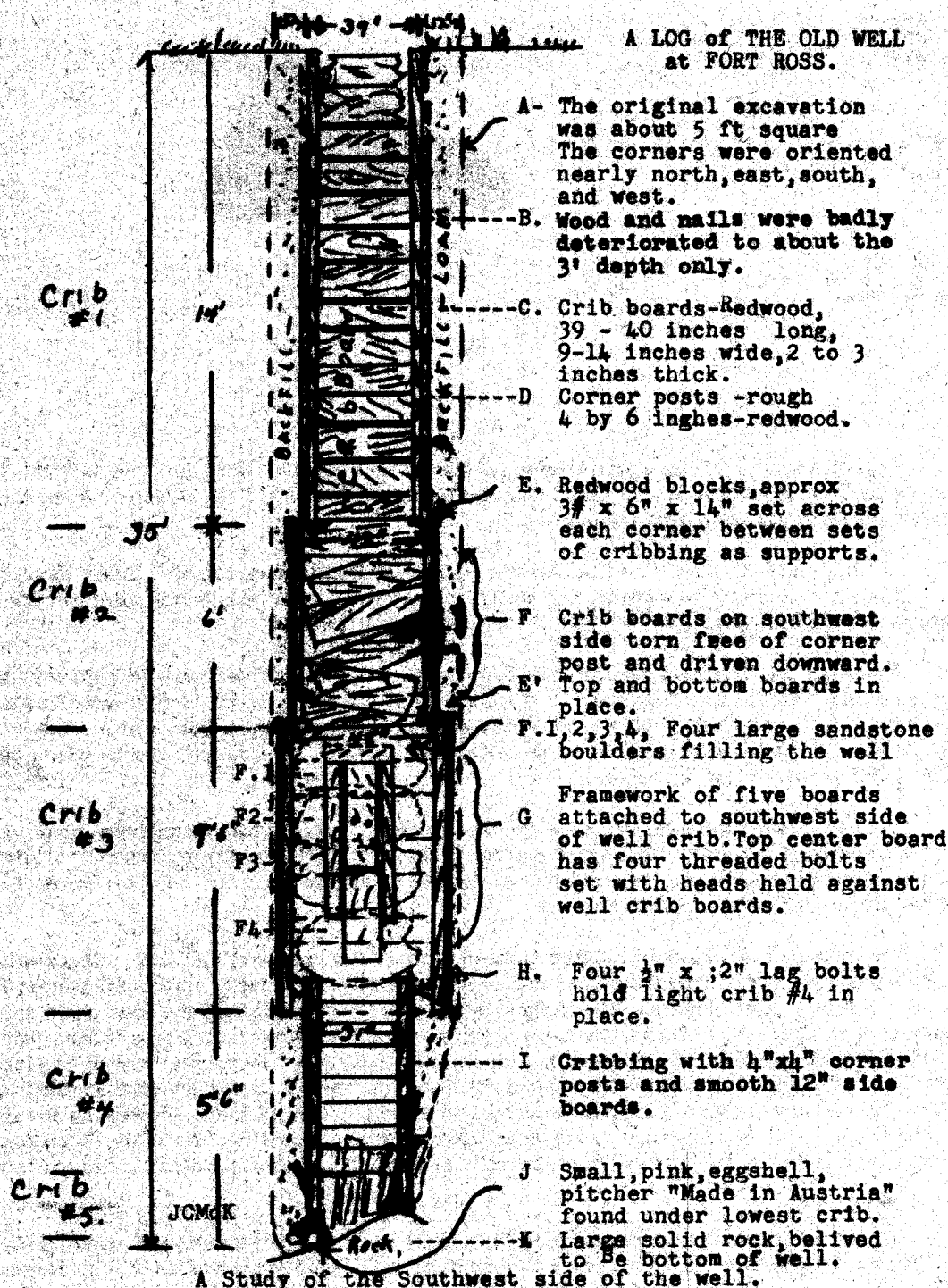
There seemed, however, to be a fair chance that items of historical interest or value might be retrieved from the well. With this and for reasons of curiosity the excavation of the well was begun in August of 1953 by a crew of archaeologists under the able direction of Dr. A. E. Treganza of San Francisco State College.

The site of the well was located more or less in the center of the Fort. There was evidence of a wooden crib of heavy vertical corner posts supporting sturdy horizontal boards forming a well case about 39 inches square. The corners were almost oriented with the four chief points of the compass. The outer boards had been nailed from the outside rather than being "toenailed" to the corner posts from the inside. All the wood had been split and hewed instead of sawed to size. Fine clear redwood was used. The nails were typical machine cut square iron nails of the middle and late 1800s. The topmost boards were badly deteriorated to a depth of three feet. Otherwise the old crib was found to be in place as the excavations went down to about a depth of ten feet. Then rising water forced the work to stop. The fill was found to be typical Indian mound soil. No artifacts were found.

The excavation was continued by a State Park crew including Ranger I, Charles L. Knight, Curator I, John C. McKenzie, and Carpenter Nelvin S. Cobb, in December of 1953. By November 25, 1954, the well had been deepened to a depth of 35 feet as the old cribbing came to light. This seemed to have been the complete depth of the old well. An efficient pump to control the rising water made this work possible.

The first recognized historical artifacts were found at a depth of 11 feet. A few fragments of white ironstone china, then a piece of fine white china with a green floral design were found. Then a rather modern appearing silverplated table fork was found. It bore a monogram "R" inside an elaborate horseshoe on the handle. This was a product of "M. A. Rodgers, Oneida Ltd.". Lastly, a well-rusted horseshoe was found, with a large handwrought iron nail eight inches long with a round head and shaft. These were found at a depth of 14 feet.

At 14 feet a new set of crib boards was found. The sides were increased to about 42 inches on the side. Short sturdy redwood blocks had been placed across each of the lower corner posts to
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THE EXCAVATION OF THE OLD WELL (continued from the previous page)

help support the upper set of crib boards. The horizontal side boards were a bit thicker than those in the upper set. The ends had been bevelled by an axe to permit the use of rather short machine-cut square iron nails to hold them in place. Once again the nails had been driven from outside the crib.

It soon became evident that the southwest side of this crib had been damaged. The heavy horizontal boards were found to be torn free of the corner posts. Many had been driven downward with great violence. The other three sides of the well remained unaffected.

The hazard of this condition made it necessary to remove all the old cribbing and set a new crib in place to a depth of 20 feet. This new crib was made 48 inches square. Three inch by 12 inch (continued on the following page)

THE EXCAVATION OF THE OLD WELL (continued from the previous page)

redwood was used for this purpose. It was lowered by undermining the tiers and adding to them at the top as the new crib worked downward.

There was a change in the nature of the fill material between 14 feet and 20 feet in the well. Indian mound soil gave way to rock, small boulders, and clay. No artifacts came to our attention.

At a depth of 20 feet a third and wider set of redwood cribbing was revealed. This crib measured about 48 to 50 inches on a side. Once again short blocks of wood across the corners prevented the upper crib from telescoping down into this third structure. Split and hewed boards and corner posts were found. The nature of the nails was not positively determined.

Mr. Knight was somewhat startled to find the opening of the well almost completely blocked by a great tan sandstone boulder. He removed it by slowly shattering it with a steel bar and a pick. Below it was another boulder of equal size. Eventually four great boulders were broken up and removed. The lowest one was found to be resting upon the upright corner posts of a fourth set of cribbing at a depth of 29 feet. This was certainly the explanation for the damage noticed in the cribbing between 14 and 20 foot depths.

An even more puzzling feature came to light while the first of these great rocks was being removed. A one-inch board about five inches wide and 25 inches long was found to be fastened in a horizontal position in the center of the southwest side of the well at about the 21 foot depth. A sturdy redwood board about an inch and a half thick and 12 inches wide with lighter boards about one inch thick and five inches wide on either side extended down the side of the well. This gave the impression of a small door with the usual header and side framing. Soon four threaded bolts were discovered protruding from the central board in a rough square. When finally revealed, this feature was found to be made of two heavy boards about three feet long, set end to end down the side of the well. The narrow side boards were only five feet long. Heavy nails had once secured all these boards to the side of the well, but they had long since rusted away. The entire structure soon fell free of its own weight. The crib of the well had been planed flat under the boards; otherwise there was nothing under the boards.

The fourth set of cribbing found at 29 feet was unique. It measured 31 inches wide on the northeast and southwest sides and 38 inches on the opposite sides. The redwood side boards were only about an inch thick and of uniform widths, smooth as milled lumber. The four by four inch corner posts had been cut on a large circle saw. The corner posts extended down some six feet or so and rested on an irregular large boulder which seemed to be the bottom of the well. The horizontal side boards stopped about two feet short of the bottom of the corner posts.

Near the top of this set of crib boards it was found that four large lag bolts or drift pins had been driven through this set of side boards and anchored into the lowest boards of the upper crib. Obviously this was necessary to prevent this wooden structure from floating free and rising with the water.

A fifth set of wall boards was found set in below this peculiar crib and set at an acute angle leaning outward. These narrow vertical boards had evidently been so set to prevent the fill material between the cribs and the surrounding rock from working down into the bottom of the well.

When it seemed certain that the bottom of the well had been found, an effort was made to screen the accumulated mud on the chance that artifacts might be found. The only item found was a delicate pink china pitcher with fine green floral designs. The handle was broken and part of it was missing. It bore the inscription "Made in Austria" in English as a mark on the bottom plate.

Our inquiries since 1954 have failed to add to our information about this well. The presence of "machine-cut, square iron nails" would suggest that the cribbing which we found had been placed after the Russians left in 1844. The Russians made their own nails and they were of a different design from those found in the well's cribbing. We can only guess that the work was done by someone between the years 1844 and 1874. No reason has been found for the dimensions of the various sets of cribbing.

When the lowest levels of the well were cleaned out there was a change in the water
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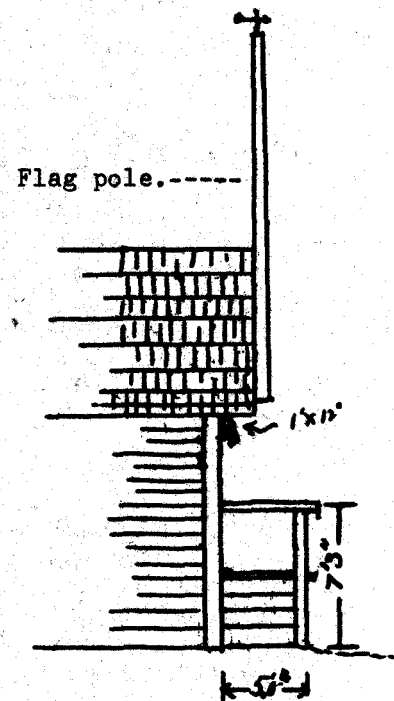
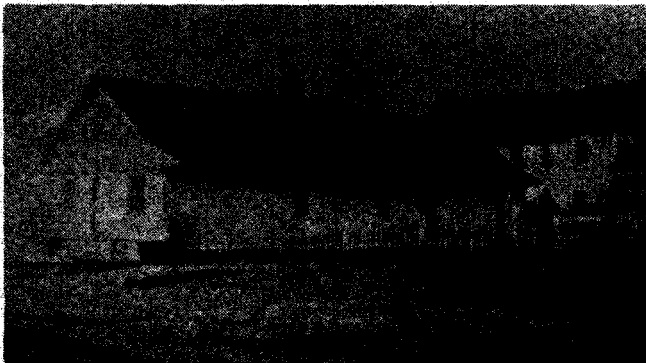
THE EXCAVATION OF THE OLD WELL (continued from the previous page)

problem. The water, which had been a continuous problem, seemed now to leave the well faster than it came in. The well went relatively dry for a time. A porous strata was now draining the water out of the well. Had this occurred when men were trying to deepen the well to improve its supply of water? It seemed this may be the case. It could explain the hurried filling of the well with sand, soil and those great boulders.

The little china pitcher with its English inscription remained a puzzle for four years. Then it was revealed that a sympathetic neighbor, seeing our fruitless search for historical artifacts, had quietly placed the pitcher in the well so we would not go empty handed for all our months of effort! The donor has remained anonymous to this day.

JOHN C. McKENZIE

Curator I, Fort Ross State Historical Monument



SIDE VIEW as seen from the South.

