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The Maritime History of Fort Ross

(Text of lecture given at Fort Ross Docents' Course, Sat. November 15, 1975)

To begin with, it is interesting to note that just as the sightseers on the grounds at Fort Ross see the harbor last, if they see it at all, this section of your course also comes at the last. Yet, to the Russians, the ocean came first. They did not arrive on Highway One. But before we get into that, we will take a look at the coast of Northern California, even though to many of you it will be a review of the obvious.

Northern California is noted for its lack of harbors. San Francisco Bay is famous for its size and the access it gives to the interior; but it is often overlooked that it's the only harbor on the coast with relatively easy access, protection and capacity.

Then we have that prevailing northwest wind blowing onto the coast, over a current moving north to south. This makes the coastline a lee shore - which is dangerous for sailing vessels, especially square-riggers. As a result explorers and traders had to keep well out to sea, and come in with much caution. The frequent and heavy summer fogs did not help any. The best-known result of all this is that San Francisco Bay was discovered by an overland expedition.

A lesser-known fact also bears on the situation. The coastal current sets from north to south, but along our coast at the shore, there is a counter current from south to north. It extends only a mile or two out from shore, and in our area it is weak - only a half-mile an hour or so. But it is persistent, except when checked occasionally by a stiff northwest wind, and this explains why our few rivers exit to the north when they reach the ocean, and the bars close over in summer from south to north.

Then, once on the shore - what lies behind it? Mostly a rugged coast range, hard to cross. Our small coastal areas are isolated from the interior, leaving the ocean - in the early days - as the only way out for travel and transport. With the nautical situation what it is, this means isolation by both land and sea.

When my friend Mrs. Escola, of Mendocino, was registering at San Jose Normal School in the Fall of 1906, the registrar asked her where she lived. When she told him, Mendocino, he replied: "Mendocino - why that's the Siberia of California."

Further, in the early days, the whole Pacific Ocean was isolated from the European population and commercial centers. The Pacific could be reached overland in middle America: Panama provided access to the west coast of South America, while Acapulco was the gateway for the Philippines. Later, the Russians arrived overland through Siberia, and English and American trappers crossed North America. But, ocean access meant, usually, rounding Cape Horn, and it took a lot of economic incentive to get anyone to do that.

The end result of this, so far as Northern California was concerned, was that there wasn't much sea traffic to Upper California from the Atlantic or from Mexico; and such as there was, seldom went north of Monterey. Most traffic in Spanish and Mexican California went by land at first. It was the lack of shipping, and of opportunities for trading, that led to the Russian activities being accepted privately by individuals, although officially resented and opposed.

Gradually, by the 1840's, a limited amount of local traffic had developed, but for our story, it has little bearing.

The Indian Period

The maritime activity of the Northern California Indians can be said to be nil, so far as travel was concerned. (In the Santa Barbara area, it was different; visible offshore islands gave an incentive, and pitch was available for caulking, so boats were built and operated by the local Chumash.)

For a stone-age culture, a semi-desert land like California can make for relatively slim pickings, but given a mild climate and a sufficient supply for gathering by foraging, a population can be supported. In our area this was the Pomo.

One of the areas open to foraging was the tidal area along the shore. Abalone, mussels and other shellfish, surf-fish, anemones, gum boots (the red Cryptochiton) and kelp were all available foodstuffs.

Fort Ross was an ideal location as a headquarters for such foraging, since there were sand and stone beaches; and level land behind the sand beach as well as up on the bluff, where everything gathered could be spread to dry. This was the routine: spread to dry in summer, and store; then, during the winter, soak, boil and eat.

Also, the bluff shore allowed for deer to be driven over the bluff, to be killed, or crippled for easy despatch - for meat and hides.

The village location was one of convenience to the beach, with a minor protection by the ridge from the summer winds. This would be a permanent location; how far afield they went up and down the coast in their food-gathering I do not know.

Interestingly enough, there was a tie with Bodega even then. There is a tradition that Bodega Head was still an island when the present Indian tribes arrived, and that the sand-spit built up later. In any event, it was a no-tribe's-land - a sacred area where medicine men from the tribes around went for prayers and visions, and left offerings.

Whether there was any sea-food drying at Fort Ross after the Russians arrived, I do not know. It certainly had to be moved away, as (and I almost quote from modern statements) not in harmony with and detracting from the long-range plan for development of Fort Ross. So you can see, the urge to chase the skin-divers and shore fishermen out of Fort Ross has a long history. They are the modern successors of the foraging savages who some say can be tolerated only when they don't get in the way.

Before starting on the use of Fort Ross harbor, there is one further aspect of operating conditions on our coast that I should mention: northbound travel by water along our coast was slow. Schooners could tack up the coast fairly close in; square-riggers had to go way out - in fact, usually going southwest before turning north. I can't give you accurate figures between Ft. Ross and the City, but for Mendocino and Caspar, a normal northbound trip in summer took three nights and two days, while the return trip would be eighteen to twenty-four hours. If wind conditions were really difficult, the northbound trip could take days longer. The lee of Bodega Head was one popular place to wait out the wind, while Pt. Reyes was often referred to as Cape Stiff (i.e. Cape Horn).

Also to reach the desired port, they would have to work to the north of it, because they had to come in with the northwest wind behind them, and round in to the harbor.

Headlands do provide occasional patches of shelter from the prevailing northwesterlies along our coast, but these shelters, or ports, are wide open to the south winds and southwest swell of winter. This means that the harbors offer some protection against a summer nuisance, but no protection against a winter danger.

California, then, was easy to reach from Alaska; and from a base well north in California it was easy to run south to a hunting-ground. The trip back would be another matter, so hunting would have to stop well before the onset of winter, both to get back to the base before it became potentially dangerous to use, and then get back to Alaska.

This brings us to local maritime aspects of the Russian period at Fort Ross.

The Russian Period 1814-1841

When talking about the Russians at Fort Ross, it is easy to overlook the basic fact concerning their arrival in California: they went to Bodega Bay. For all their purposes, it was a better location.

At Bodega we have a large ocean roadstead in the area between the entrances to Tomales and Bodega Bays, where ships could anchor in thirty-five to fifty feet of water, with plenty of elbow room, protected from the force of the summer wind by Bodega Head. Bodega Bay itself is a lagoon, not as shallow then as now, with a short narrow bar, and a channel leading to the upper end where small boats could be loaded. Behind Bodega, the country was easy of access, and not forested, a logical place for the farming activities that eventually developed.

Trans-shipping of cargo from local to long-distance shipping could be readily handled at Bodega, and there was room inside the bar under the Head for their depot. Loads from the depot, or from the head of the lagoon, could be taken out over the bar on the ebb; the empties (or boats with inbound supplies) would go back in with the flood. Ship's workboats and baidarkas handled the traffic.

If headquarters could have remained at Bodega Bay, the situation would have been ideal - for Northern California, that is; so far as the Company was concerned. Spanish resentment could not be ignored, even if the threats were empty. The depot could be operated; farming and ranching could be carried on with some risk, and eventually was; but headquarters had to be somewhere else.

Going north from Bodega, the cove here at Fort Ross is the first one of any size that offers a practicable, somewhat sheltered landing. A vessel in the northwest part of the cove is protected from the wind, although the swell does come round the point to cause ranging. There is a sand beach, as well as a rocky beach. Behind the sand beach is some flat land leading back into a gulch, and it was not difficult to cut a road down to the stone beach.

From the sand beach to the top of the bluff, the slope could be negotiated with comparative ease, and at the top there was a level area suitable for a stockaded headquarters. This stockade served for defense, but it had another use; I wonder if the location of the commandant's house was changed to get out of the wind into the best lee. (Remember, there were no trees.) The stockade location dominated the harbor, and also had a clear view south to Bodega Head; also to the south was ravine after ravine with cliffs between - remember the threat was from the south.

Behind the stockade, and north and south of it was about a thousand acres of coastal plain amenable to ~~any~~ agriculture. That ever present wind and fog limited the possibilities, especially for grain; hence the steady expansion at Bodega.

Another point - on a lee shore, the harbor's position had to be located from a distance. Fort Ross has a good landmark, what Cabrillo had called the Cabo de Pinos, or Cape of Pines. It is not a cape, but from a distance at sea, the approach of the coast range close to shore - which causes the existence of the shelf road - looks like a cape. This "cape" is also the last place going south where the forest approaches the shore. Thus, the last promontory with trees was a good landmark to spot from afar to indicate where a ship should go in.

Once they went in, what would they find? To the Russians, the cove stretched in the large from the Northwest Cape, we know as the northwest head of the cove, to the Southeast Cape. This last is what they called the point from which the Fort Ross Reef runs out to the pinnacle rocks. There are some rocks off the northwest head which have to be cleared when coming in with the wind from the northwest. Once in the cove, they would find thirty to forty feet of water over a rocky bottom, with twelve feet close to shore, even off the sand beach.

Where the shallow headland is, between what we think of as the two coves of Fort Ross Cove or Bay, a reef runs out to a rock that is awash a low tide. To use the north cove, this reef has to be avoided.

On the first visits, anchor was dropped. Whether a system of moorings was ever set up, I do not know, but they would have been useful. Another advantage of the cove was that on hauling out to make sail, they could easily slip out to the south to head on out to sea.

It is interesting to note that there are no reports of wrecks here during the Russian period. Probably, their knowledge of the North Pacific in general and of Alaska specifically had made them very weather wise. With the worse weather of Alaska in winter, winter traffic down here would also be at a minimum.

Compared to Bodega, loading and unloading at Fort Ross was a little simpler. There wasn't as far to go, and they were not dependent on the ebb and flow of the tide. Rufus stated that the Russians had built a pier in the cove. Since he says it was held to the rocks by long bolts, it was probably wood, rather than dry stone. This pier would be very useful, but would have to be repaired year after year.

One can dimly imagine the to-do when a ship arrived. Unless the pier was in use, the ship's boats or the baicarkas had to be held just beyond the surf line, and the men assigned to stevedoring had to carry everything from and to the boat. Everything includes those passengers who were important enough to be carried rather than be forced to wade through the cold water.

All this was clumsy, but it was the usual thing in all primitive areas and some not so primitive. At the beginning of our century, travelers to Jerusalem had to go through just this same procedure at Joppa.

As was the case at any such outlying colony that was a base for sea-faring activity, ship-building was undertaken. The workmen were probably those who could be spared from the shipyard at Sitka. There seems to have been some construction at Bodega, but principally at Ft. Ross. The secondary sources are confusing in the details, but apparently five ships, schooners and brigs, were built, types that are better for coastal voyaging than is the standard three-masted square-rigger.

Bancroft names four: Roumiantzof (schooner 1816-18); Buldahof (brig 1819-1820); Volga (1821-22); Kiakhta (1823-24); as well as several boats for local use or sale to the Spanish. The secondary sources also say that these ships were failures and did not last long - but by this they mean five or six years.

Since oak was hard to come by, it is assumed that the shipwrights had to learn to handle redwood by trial and error, and redwood would be hard to use. It splits easily, takes time to season properly - hard to do on the damp coast - and its pattern of shrinkage and expansion would tend to pull planks apart where the ends butted.

The fifth ship is said to have been named the Constantine. It was still in use when the Company closed down its local operations and was included in the chattels sold to Sutter. He re-named it the Sacramento, and it made several round trips between Fort Ross or Bodega and New Helvetia before it was finally wrecked somewhere up the river. Whether Sutter managed to move any supplies by water after that, I have not ascertained.

However, once the stripping of the excess chattels was completed, the port at Fort Ross would have gone into an eclipse. Sutter set up a cattle ranch. Any stock for sale would be driven out overland, while hides could be handled by pack animals. Only ~~the~~ supplies that could not be handled overland by packtrain would arrive by water - and I would doubt, considering the shortage of shipping for local transport in California at that time, that there would be such if any of this.

Bodega would be another matter, since at the time the Russians left, Stephen Smith was on his way to the U.S. for a steam saw mill, which went into operation at Bodega Corners in 1843. Eventually, once the local demand was satisfied, Bodega Bay would be used to receive supplies, and ship lumber. Meanwhile, Smith bought the Russian buildings at Bodega from Sutter in 1846.

The First Ranch Period

William Otto Benitz apparently reached New Helvetia in 1842 after traveling overland through Texas and New Mexico. In the Fall of 1843, Sutter sent him to Fort Ross as manager in place of Bidwell, and Benitz arrived for what was to be a stay of twenty-three years. First as manager, then as lessee, and finally as owner in 1847, he continued operating the property as a cattle ranch which stretched from Timber Cove to the Russian River.

Then came the gold rush, and the resulting influx of population which had to secure food and shelter from local sources. This meant new possibilities for the Fort Ross Ranch.

Benitz's primary venture was in farming, since he had a Pomo community at hand as a ready source of farm labor. They were cheap labor, too; at that time, reservation Indians were forced to hire out to neighboring ranches at \$8.00 a month and found, while Europeans commanded \$25.00 or \$30.00. There was a heavy demand for a crop that could be easily grown at Fort Ross - potatoes, and to this he turned.

I must interrupt here to explain that our records of Benitz's water traffic is spotty. Shipments to San Francisco were reported in the City papers, but very rarely were shipments to other bay points or up the river mentioned. There must have been a number of consignments to such inner ports, since Benitz had been around for many years, and was well known at Sonoma.

Other than a load of piles in July of 1850 (tree trunks dragged down to the beach and floated out to the schooner), Fort Ross first appears in the City papers in March and April of 1852, when four schooner loads of potatoes, totaling about 2,500 sacks, reached the City from Fort Ross. That this wasn't all he shipped out can be judged by his own statement that in 1852 he sold four thousand sacks of potatoes at five cents a pound.

Potatoes continued to loom large. I have found a six hundred sack shipment in Feb. 1853, and two consignments early in 1855: March 18th at S.F.: 1,100 sacks of potatoes, three hundred deer-skins and a hundred cowhides; May 18th at S.F., 1,300 sacks of potatoes and thirty-four hogs.

There was a building in the field south of Fort Ross Gulch which Benitz used as a potato storehouse. Tradition also says that there was a chute down the bluff to the beach. From the beach to the schooner meant using some kind of workboat: a ship's boat or a locally built scow or barge. This would have to be held just outside the surf line while the stevedores carried out the sacks. Then the lighter would have to be moved to the ship. The usual practice would be to run a line from schooner to lighter, and then winch up the line on a capstan, to tow it to shipside. Rowing the empty lighter back to the beach would be relatively easy.

I once asked Carlos Call how fast such loading would have gone, in his judgment. It was his opinion that loading six or seven hundred sacks of potatoes in a ten-hour day, would have been considered a good day's work by this method, if and when everything ~~xxxxxxx~~ went well.

But 1855 was a difficult year. There was a severe depression in California for various reasons, and also an overproduction in potatoes, and the market collapsed. Benitz himself said he was left with twenty thousand sacks of potatoes jammed into his storage building. Local tradition says that some of the potatoes swelled, and with this added pressure, the walls bulged.

Trade revived, although there was another setback in the Panic of 1857. But Benitz was doing well - in 1858, with assets of \$64,000 he was rated as the fourth richest man in Sonoma County. Meanwhile, his activities continued to broaden.

October 10, 1858 is the arrival date for five tons of wheat and 384 boxes of apples - which means about seventy sacks of wheat and the apples from some twenty-five trees. Benitz had begun with the Russian orchard, which included 207 apple trees, and had expanded from that. In 1859, he said he planned to put in about eighteen hundred apple trees the following year; records show that the orchard of 1860 came to seventeen hundred and twenty-five trees. (They're all gone, now.)

By 1860, there was even more activity. A shipload in March of 1860 had twelve hundred fifty-five sacks of potatoes, three coops of ducks, four coops of pigeons, thirty-four hides, twenty-six boxes of butter and two boxes of eggs.

1860 reflects another attempt by Benitz to exploit everything possible. On July 25 there was a cargo of seventy tons of building stone, and another shipload arrived in November. This too had to be lightered. Professor Essig, who visited Fort Ross several times in the 1920's, said he had noticed signs of a sandstone quarry at the beach, but thought it was Russian.

After 1860, there's little record of Fort Ross - one can only assume that traffic was continuing to go to Sonoma and other towns, and the family tradition is that he shipped principally to Sonoma and also to Sacramento. Cattle would still go overland, probably to William Bihler, the wholesale butcher at Lakeville and owner of the Delmar Ranch. Another market for his cattle and other ranch products was probably Duncan's Mill, first at Salt Point (1854) and later at Russian River (1860). But we do have a record in

San Francisco for March 1866 - eight hundred sacks of potatoes and five hundred sacks of barley; and for June, 1866 - eleven hundred sacks of oats.

Meanwhile, he had not ignored forest products, and this led to the development of the harbor at Timber Cove, drawing on the Timber Cove Gulch.

Loading forest products on ships can be done by lightering, but it is time-consuming, and a better way had already been put into use at Mendocino, the use of the slide chute. The chute at Timber Cove, which stood for sixty years, may have been built as early as 1857 when the first shipments of split stuff started going out to the city - first piles and later posts. But it had to be built no later than 1859, the year lumber started going out.

The lumber mill of 1859 was operated by two Germans, Kalkman and Snaple. They had the chute, a tramway that ran for a half mile, into the gulch to the mill, and a small sawmill rated at twenty-five thousand board feet a day. Business was steady - the schooner Palestine usually being employed - until the latter part of 1862, when the sawmill burned. The last lumber went out at the beginning of 1863, and from then on, Timber Cove was a split-stuff landing, doing a steady business.

There was one other concession that Benitz leased out, and that was the proposed coal mine. But nothing seems to have ever come of this, save for an exploratory shaft, so it does not figure in our marine history.

By 1865, Benitz had decided to leave, and he put the ranch up for sale. He finally found a buyer, the partnership of Fairfax and Dixon. Early in 1867, the Benitz family moved to Oakland, where he invested in real estate in the new community. He must have done well in Oakland, for when he left for Argentina in 1874, the sale of his properties brought him a hundred thousand dollars.

The Lumber Mill Interlude - Fairfax and Dixon

Fairfax was an early California character who had managed to marry money. Dixon was a small sawmill operator at Nicasio in Marin County. The Fairfaxes invested in the land, while Dixon with his sawmill provided a way to get some income out of the property until they could sell it off.

Dixon must have seen his prospects as good, because he got married in the Spring of 1867, but there was a lot to do. The mill had to be moved from Nicasio to Kolmer Gulch. Where the equipment was put ashore, Fort Ross or Timber Cove, I have no idea. I am sure, however, that the boiler for the steam engine was handled in the usual way: all holes were plugged, it was dropped overboard and floated to land, and then cragged ashore.

One new item was needed at Fort Ross before operations could begin - a slide chute for loading the lumber on ships. Dixon would not use Timber Cove for two reasons: first, Benitz had either sold or given the Timber Cove property to relatives of his wife, and

second, it might have worked out for Kolmer Gulch, but not for Fort Ross Gulch. By this time, chute-building had become relatively an every-day matter on the Mendocino and Sonoma coasts, so the only problem was the proper design for the location, just inside the west head of the Fort Ross Cove, in the north-west corner of the cove.

A slide chute was a playground slide on a large scale, slung like half of a suspension bridge from a single tower.

At Fort Ross, the "tower" was a gallows frame made of eighteen by eighteen inch timbers, standing about seventy-five feet high. It was footed in two post holes dug into a rock just off shore at the location. (These holes can still be seen.) The uprights were eight feet apart to the level of the chute proper (thirty-five feet up), and then toed in to be six feet apart at the top. These uprights were braced to the rear, and a guy wire x ran out from the bank to each side.

The chute proper was three feet six inches wide, the usual width for a lumber chute. It was made of two by eight stringers, as long as you could get them; bolted to these every four feet were two by four or two by six crosspieces to support the floor. The floor was made of one by sixes, not tightly fitted.

The outer end of the slide was made of three hinged sections. The first hinge was about eighteen feet out from the frame, and the sections were eighteen feet long. To support these, a boom ran out, from which three falls hung, one to a section. Spreaders for the falls were high enough to permit walking under them. The boom was an A frame to the second fall, holding a single stick beyond. The boom was guyed over the top of the gallows frame, while the leads for the two-sheave blocks on the falls led to cleats at the cross-piece of the gallows frame where the slide passed through.

All this carried the slide out to where a schooner could ride in a depth of twelve feet of water at low tide.

The inner end of the slide was carried along a shallow trough dug in the lip of the cliff, to a suitable level area behind, where wagons could come up to the loading end of the chute. This inner end was about one hundred seventy feet long, and the loading point was set high enough for a convenient transfer of the boards.

The supports for the chute floor extended out at one side to permit a two-foot catwalk from the bank to the frame. Beyond that, anyone who had to go out, walked in the bed of the slide. At the outer end of the chute was mounted a three by three foot platform on one side, where the clapperman stood during loading operations.

When a schooner came in to unload and load, it rode so that its rail was under the end of the chute. Naturally, the apron, as the movable end was called, had to be adjusted for the position of the tide and how high the ship rode in the water; and it took three men to work the falls.

To load, the boards were simply slide down the chute, to be checked by the clapperman, so that crew members could pick them off the chute for stowing.

To handle up-freight, and incidental down-freight, a car was used that fitted into the bed of the chute. It was six feet long, with one and a quarter inch axles. The wheels were six inches in diameter with five inch faces, and the floor of the car was ten inches above the floor of the slide. Loaded, it was pulled up by two horses. If it was to go down the slide empty, it was allowed to roll down - if it stopped, it was moved with a wooden pry. If it went down loaded - with butter and eggs for example - two turns of the rope around a post at the head of the slide, allowed for proper handling. Five or six hundred pounds of freight could be handled over the chute with this car.

To ride under the chute, a schooner had to be moored with several lines; at Fort Ross there were six. This meant there had to be mooring buoys, which meant large logs, fourteen or sixteen feet long, a foot and a half or so in diameter, with a six inch hole for the mooring line in one end. From the other end ran a heavy chain to an anchor; and this anchor was backed to another anchor or to shore.

When a schooner came in, it picked up an outer mooring - no coastal ship ever dropped anchor in a coastal port if it could possibly be helped. Then it was warped over to its position under the chute.

The lumber schooners were loaded by stowing a board or two at a time. They could take a little over a quarter of their load in the hold; the rest went on deck till the vessel was properly loaded, which meant the deck was awash just forward of the house. Then the load was lashed down, the schooner was warped back to the outer mooring, and when wind conditions were favorable, it raised sail and left.

Such was the harbor situation that Dixon arranged to work with, just as most people did along the coast. The chute was well built - it lasted for three decades.

Dixon ran the mill at the Kolmer Gulch location, and teased the lumber to the landing, about a two mile haul. With this gulch cleaned out, he moved the mill to Fort Ross Gulch and logged there, while planning for the future. Of course, a split stuff trade was also developed.

Fairfax had died late in 1869, so it was left to the widow, with Dixon, to sell off the ranch, which they did in sections. For example, the land south of Russian Gulch was sold to John Rule. Finally, the Fort Ross home ranch was sold to George W. Call, but Dixon already had a place to go.

In 1874, he moved up the coast to Bridgeport, and from that place he moved in 1875 to Greenwood, and leaves our story.

The lumber-mill interlude in the history of Fort Ross ended, and the property was once again to be worked as a ranch, as it would continue to be for another century.

The Second Ranch Period.

To begin with, there are a couple of points in George W. Call's background to consider in connection with his buying the Fort Ross ranch. He had a knowledge of seafaring from his long schooner voyage from San Francisco to Chile with the wild animal show. Also, he knew about California's forest products from his stay in Humboldt County in the 1850's. And, he was ready to hire a manager so that he could spend time on his real-estate interests in the city without hurting the day to day operations.

With the property, of course, came the wharf - that is, the chute; and this is a good place to point out that this made him the owner of a public utility. The chute was operated under a franchise from Sonoma County, under authority delegated to the counties by the legislature, and the charges for handling freight over the chute were established by the Board of Supervisors. Although I haven't found a rate schedule for the Fort Ross chute, the chute book shows what some of the rates were - and these were typical for that day:

Tanbark - one dollar per cord.

Cordwood - seventy-five cents per cord.

Posts - one dollar per hundred.

Butter - twenty-five cents a box, fifty cents a barrel.

This is one hundred thirty-two pounds to a box; the barrel was a fifty gallon size, of butter and brine, weighing about four hundred fifty pounds in all.

Eggs - ten cents a box - thirty or thirty-six dozen.

Wool - fifty cents a bale.

Apples - ten cents a box.

Merchandise - one dollar and fifty cents a ton - two thousand pounds weight or forty cubic feet measure - up or down. Up freight included grain, hay, ground feed, wagon tires, flour by the barrel, and all kinds of groceries and supplies.

The main source of volume business for the chute when Call took over was the split stuff trade: tanbark, cordwood and posts. The larger part of this trade was most probably his own dealings, but others could ship over the chute if they wished.

The second source of business was the dairy that was the main business of the ranch. The cash crop was butter, and along with this would be calves butchered and dressed as veal, and live hogs raised on the skim milk. If you want a clear picture of how a dairy ranch operated, look in the 1880 Marin County History, which has a detailed description of such a ranch in the Point-Reyes - Tomales Point area.

An incidental source of business was the seasonal shipments from the apple orchards.

The split stuff business was heavy in the seventies and the eighties, but slowly tapered off. In 1877, eighty-six vessels

called at Fort Ross, and among other things, sixteen hundred and nineteen cords of tanbark were shipped, fifteen hundred and forty-eight cords of firewood, and thirty-two thousand, seven hundred eighty-three posts - or about four thousand three hundred cords of split stuff in all.

In 1893, the business was fifteen ships, for about eleven hundred fifty cords in all.

Handling split stuff on the chute was a little different from handling lumber. A split stuff chute was usually five or six feet wide, since most split stuff was four feet long. In a lumber chute, split stuff would jam now and then, and someone would have to go down and loosen it.

The wood and bark came from the storage piles on two-wheel carts in half cord loads. These loads were simply dumped into the chute, down which they went with a roar. No clapper was used, and a brake wasn't needed at Fort Ross. The crew simply laid a chafing floor on the deck, and put up a backstop against the bulwarks; they stood out of the way as a load came down, and then proceeded to stow it.

Up freight, and other down freight, continued to ride the slide on the car. At first there was a sufficient traffic of ships to take care of freight to and from the ranch, and for neighbors, but as the split stuff traffic dwindled, it was obvious that another type of handling was needed. With not enough traffic for a steam schooner, the only out was to use the gasoline schooner, which had recently made its appearance on the coast.

Call considered the possibilities for a weekly service to the City, and scouted the possible traffic from ranchers around Fort Ross and Bodega Bay. In February of 1896, the Etta H. began weekly service, weather permitting. The resulting traffic was satisfactory, so two steps were taken. A wharf was built, of stone and wood, in the northeast corner of the cove, where the road went down. And since Jim Campbell of Bodega Bay didn't care about going up to Fort Ross, Call ordered a new gasoline schooner from Turner's yard at Benicia. The *La Chilena*, forty-two feet long, fourteen feet wide, and powered by a forty horsepower motor, began operating late in May of 1897, and ran regularly for almost two years.

Here are two lists of cargo leaving Fort Ross on the *La Chilena*: July 19, 1897 - 18½ boxes of butter, 31 hogs, 9 calves, one wagon, one coop chickens.

November 8, 1898 - 156 boxes fruit, 4 boxes butter, nine calves, household goods.

Bear in mind that only part of this was from the Call ranch. There were often shipments from four or five other ranches.

The traffic needed a larger vessel, and Call discussed this with Campbell in Bodega. The two men made a deal. They exchanged schooners but not power plants, so that the 40 hp engine went into the *Mary C.* This vessel had been built in Sausalito in 1893; she was fifty-five feet long and fourteen and a half feet wide. *La Chilena*, of course, was Mrs. Call; *Mary C.* was Jim Campbell's mother.

You will notice that the ties of Fort Ross with Bodega have again appeared. The Mary C may have been the weekly schooner to Fort Ross, but it stopped at Bodega at Campbell's Cove, just inside the lagoon - this is where the Russian base had originally been; and Carlos Call told me that two-thirds or more of their business was to and from Bodega Bay. Once again, just as in the Russian period, Bodega Bay was actually more important, but Fort Ross had the headquarters, the name and the fame.

The great change came with the windstorm on the night of December 5, 1898. It was a downhill wind from the northeast for two or three hours on a clear night; Carlos told me it was the most violent wind he ever experienced - if a gate was latched, the gate broke - and the slide chute blew down.

The weekly schooner could continue to use the pier, but for split stuff, a new chute was needed. By now, the wire chute was in use up and down the coast, so George Call hired George St. Ores to build a new chute. The St. Ores brothers, who lived in Qualia, had made the wire chute practical in the late 1870's, and over the years had also worked out a type powered by a counterweight so that the expense of a steam engine was avoided. This is the type Call ordered, and a classic example of a St. Ores back action chute was installed at the location of the old slide. It went into use on July 5, 1899, with the schooner Kettie Sundborg as the first to load under the wire.

The open frame of the chute was thirty feet wide, and eighteen or twenty feet high front and rear. Set overhead in the frame was a shaft with two drums, 18 inches and 36 inches in diameter, respectively. The frame also had to hold aloft the wire cable running from the deadman out behind the frame. This wire could be raised or lowered by a set of blocks in the front of the frame.

The thousand feet of wire rope cable was made up in two parts. The offshore end was tacked to the mooring rock, and ended in a slip-hook; this wire laid on the bottom between ships with a marking buoy at the end. The inner end, ending in an eye, was curled up at the chute. When a ship came in and had picked up the moorings that held it in the proper place under the wire, the outer wire was fished up and the inner end was dragged out to the ship, about three hundred feet. The wires were connected and hung from the ship's tackle. The whole wire was then properly tightened by blocks at the dead man.

The loads were slung from a traveler that ran on the wire. The traveler's haul-back line was wound on the larger drum. Down the bank at an angle to the left ran a wire rope from which hung a counterweight; the line from this traveled around the smaller drum.

The platform was hinged at the rear so it could drop to the front. A counterweight, hung in a hole dug under the platform, held it level, and a rope running over a pulley also held the platform up. The split stuff was loaded on the two-wheel carts in half-cord lots, and a cart was backed onto the platform.

The slings were fastened, the platform was cast loose so it dropped under the weight of the cart leaving the load dangling, the brake on the drumshaft was loosened, and the load dropped down the wire by gravity to the ship, while the counterweight was wound up. When the load had been stopped at the ship and dropped from the slings, the brake was loosened, and the counterweight went down the bank, bringing the traveler back for another load.

The new chute was maintained at the old slide location until all the stock-piled split stuff had been shipped. Then the whole assembly was dismantled and re-erected on the opposite side of the northwest cove, down in front of the ranch house.

From this blunt point, the wire was run across the inner cove to a rock in the cliff at the wharf area, and the moorings were moved and the wire re-arranged so that the ship loaded about 550 feet out. You can still see where the chute stood, because a channel had to be cut in the lip of the bank for the back-action counterweight to pass through.

Meanwhile, the wharf had been a disappointment, and something had to be done about loading the Mary C from the wire, without going through all the activity that a regular ship with a larger crew was better able to handle.

The solution was to place the end of the wire about twenty feet up the bank near the wharf. This end of the wire was hung from shears, and a traveler was mounted on the wire. The Mary C now moored so that its after end was angled under the wire. The travel would take a load out to the schooner, and then a horse would walk the back line up the road to pull the traveler in to shore, with or without a load.

Another advantage to this set-up was that the wire could now be held completely out of the water between ships, stretched across the cove outside the rocky beach. It was an odd sight - nothing like it on the coast. Having a wire that could be worked from either end was even stranger - unique to Fort Ross.

Only one end could be worked at a time. The Mary C's end was worked about once a week; the other end was worked for the occasional ship, getting about a week or so's use in the course of a year.

After 1910, however, business picked up at the Sonoma Coast landings, since E.A. Richardson of Stewart's Point was shipping railroad ties from ports up and down the coast, using small steam schooners. So now to get deeper water, the Galls built a new chute back over at the original location, with the wire again running out to the mooring rock. This time, though, they did not move the chute. They apparently sold it to Galsig, who took it to Timber Cove.

When the Calls built the new chute, they did not use a counterweight. Carlos Call bought second-hand a small donkey engine winch from Murray Brothers that had been used in building the St. Francis Hotel. It had two drums: one drum worked the traveler line, letting it out and pulling it back in; while the other drum was used to raise the wire each time a load was ready, to lift it clear of the cart. The ships moored about three hundred thirty feet out. The steam schooner Newberg, for example, could handle about fourteen thousand ties, and loading this many ties was a two-day job. In those days, this was enough ties for five miles of railroad track.

But this flurry of business ended, and by the end of 1920, the Calls were faced with little or no split stuff business. Meanwhile, the motor truck had become more and more practicable, and with the improving roads, freight could now be handled overland more efficiently. In 1921, the Calls were able to sell the whole chute to Galsig, who moved it to Timber Cove. I can only assume that the Mery C's service was discontinued at this time, if not before - I have not been able to ascertain the date, but I would surmise about 1920.

In any event, the use of Fort Ross harbor for maritime freight traffic had lasted for a little over a century.

From the early 1920's on, the cove was quiet, save as fishing boats might come in, in the late afternoon, to tie up overnight out of the full force of the northwest wind.

As the years went by, there was a revival of the Indian use of the shore - foraging, this time only for abalone and fish. Fishermen fished from the rocks, while shorepickers showed up during minus tides to see what abalone they could find and take home. Then came the war, and the steady patrols of the coast guard along the shore.

With the beginning of the fifties, foraging steadily increased, for the skindiver had arrived, and many of the divers found Fort Ross very attractive. The assets were still there - a protected cove, a reef, a beach, especially the sand beach, ease of access from the top of the bluff, and plenty of rocks for abalone to grow on and for fish to hide under - fish to spear and other rich marine life to look at - and a wreck to scrounge for pieces of.

South of the Fort Ross reef there is a Sunken Reef, and one rock a thousand yards from shore comes to within eight to twelve feet from the surface. On a quiet day on a low tide, you can look out from the shelf road and see the swirl of water as a swell passes over the rock. It is called the Monterey Rock, after the coastal steamer that hit it in the early morning of May 25, 1880.

The Pomona was a steel steamer in theureka trade - 225 feet long and 33½ feet wide. She left San Francisco as scheduled on March 17, 1908, with the usual load of freight and passengers. It was another of those clear windy days with a choppy sea, so the Captain set his course to hog the beach as much as he could.

But, in plotting his course, he traced a little too far before marking the turn to clear the Monterey Bend and the Fort Ross Reef - and this brought him up to the Monterey Rock, merely an x on the chart with no name shown.

It was just about time for supper when the inevitable happened, and the Pomona hit the rock. With the plates opened, water was coming in, so the Captain had the pumps started, and headed for Fort Ross, intending to beach the steamer on the sand beach.

As the ship came up to the cove with six feet of water in the hold, however, the Captain saw the landing facilities in the north cove, and two log buoys riding in the swell. To him, these were channel buoys, so he changed course to head between them. This took him directly over the reef running out to the Mooring Rock. A skindiver friend of mine once showed me a picture of the notch it made in the rock.

The steamer stayed on the reef, but everyone got ashore. The women and children spent the night in the house, while the men gathered around a bonfire in the field across the road.

Whitelaw did preliminary salvage. Then a company bought the salvage rights and tried to float her - and failed. Whitelaw then came back and stripped her, even blasting to get at things. The hull stayed on the reef till winter, and then washed off in the first storm. There still pieces of plate scattered around on the bottom, and a few portholes have been found. One man even found the whistle, a number of years ago.

So, the skindivers have used the cove for over twenty years. If they get chased out, and the fishing boats - after eighty years - are not allowed to come in, the State Parks people may then succeed in emphasizing a falsehood - to wit, that Fort Ross Harbor is merely a pleasant backdrop. But no matter what the Parks people do, the truth about the harbor remains - it was the fundamental reason for the existence of Fort Ross to begin with.

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