Title: **Life at Fort Ross as the Indians Saw It Stories from the Kashaya**

Author(s): **Glenn Farris**

Published by: author

Source: Fort Ross Conservancy Library

URL: www.fortross.org

LIFE AT FORT ROSS AS THE INDIANS SAW IT: STORIES FROM THE KASHAYA

by Glenn J. Farris, Associate Archeologist
California Department of Parks and Recreation
(Paper presented at the annual meetings of the Alaska Anthropological Association, Fairbanks, Alaska, March 28, 1992.)

ABSTRACT

History is generally seen through the eyes of the dominant class in a society. Rarely is the viewpoint of the underclass, stated in their own words, expressed. In his compilation of the oral history and folktales of the Kashaya Pomo, linguist Robert Oswalt has provided some fascinating accounts of life with the Russians and Alaskan Native peoples experienced by these natives of the vicinity of Fort Ross. Such things as new foods, marital experiences including domestic violence, suicide of a spouse, at least one industrial accident, the marvel of a passing Hudson's Bay party and more are woven into these tales. Some are in the form of folk history, others cautionary tales. Together they form a remarkable body of history for a people typified as being ahistorical. This paper will sift through a number of the relevant Kashaya texts and try to place into perspective the observations of everyday life contained in them.

INTRODUCTION

The Russian settlement at Fort Ross, California, which existed for nearly 30 years (1812-1841) was made up of a small number of ethnic Russians, Finns, and Siberians, as well as a sizable contingent of "Aleuts," (actually, a mixture of Aleuts, Kodiak Islanders, Tana'ina from Kenai Peninsula and other Alaskan natives) and an ever-growing number of Creoles (as the mix of Russian and Native American was called). Since they brought few women with them, a number of these men took the local Kashaya, Bodega Miwok, and other Pomo women as wives. At least 45 California women are named in censuses of Fort Ross by Ivan Kuskov in 1820 and 1821 as living with the settlers (Fedorova 1975; Istomin n.d.). The distribution mentioned includes:

> 4 Indian women "from the region of Ross," one "Bodegin" Indian woman [married to Russians]; one Indian woman "from the region of Ross" [married to a Creole] and "17 common-law wives from the region of Ross," 10 "from the river Slavianka," and 9 "Bodegin" [married to Alaskan native men] (Fedorova 1975:12)

By 1833 Creoles, augmented by the children of the mixed marriages in the settlement, had become the largest part of the population. In that year there were 63 Creole children under the age of 16 (Gibson 1969:210).

Although there are numerous European observations of life at Fort Ross: Russian, Spanish, German, English, and French (cf. LÜtke 1989; Kostromitinov 1839; Payeras 1822; Von Wrangell 1839; and La Place 1854), these, quite naturally, give us the European perspective on life in the settlement. One of the most extensive descriptions of domestic activities within a Kashaya village was provided by Cyrille Laplace (1854:145-147; Farris 1988:22-23) during a visit in August 1839. The manager of Fort Ross, Alexander Rotchev, invited Laplace to accompany him on a visit to the neighboring Kashaya village (Métini):

> ...the habitations of these poor people consisted without exception of miserable huts formed of branches through which the rain and wind passed without difficulty. It was there that all the family, father, mother, and children, spent the nights lying pell-mell around the fire, some on cattle hides, the majority on the bare ground, and each one enveloped in a coverlet of wool which served equally as a mantle during the day, when the weather was cold or wet.
>
> ...The majority [of the women] were busy with the housekeeping, preparing meals for their husbands and children. Some were spreading out on the embers some pieces of beef given as rations, or shell fish, or even fish which these people came to catch either at the nearby river [the Gualala or possibly even the Russian River] or from the sea; while the others heated seeds in a willow basket before grinding them between two stones. In the middle of this basket there were some live coals that they shook constantly, on which each seed passed rapidly by an ever more accelerated rotating movement until they were soon parched, otherwise the inner side of the basket would be burned by the fire. Some of these

> baskets (paniers), or more accurately, these deep baskets (vases [cooking baskets]), seemed true models of basketmaking, not only by their decoration but by the finishing touches of the work. They are made...so solidly held together by the threads, that the fabric was water-resistant, as efficiently as baked clay and earthenware....

It should be noted that Laplace was seeing the people of Métini as they were after 27 years of association with Fort Ross and that their society and social structure had undergone a variety of changes over that time. In addition, they had suffered severely from epidemics which occasional raged in the vicinity of the Russian settlement, one of the most disastrous of which was the smallpox epidemic of 1837-38 which was apparently introduced at Fort Ross and then spread throughout northern California killing many tens of thousands of people. Even so, a certain amount of Laplace's negative observation was based on his European background as well as his comparisons to people he had seen on the Northwest Coast of America and in the Hawaiian Islands.

Accounts from the viewpoint of native peoples are far rarer. A few aspects of life show up in the recollections of Peter Kalifornski (Kalifornski 1991; Kari 1983) whose Tana'ina great grand-father, Nikolai Kalifornsky, lived at Fort Ross from approximately 1812-1820.

However, the richest trove comes from the Kashaya Texts, transcribed and translated by linguist Robert Oswalt (1964). These include accounts touching on various aspects of life at Fort Ross during the Russian occupation. It is these accounts which will be dealt with in this paper. In a very matter-of-fact manner a number of activities and situations of everyday life are either directly described or form the backdrop of stories. The overwhelming majority derive from a woman named Lukaria which was quite appropriate, as the Kashaya women were more likely to become deeply involved in the life of the people living at Fort Ross. Round-the-world traveler, Fedor LÜtke (1989:278), in 1818 described unions of Russians and Aleuts and Californian women which illustrate the adaptability of the Kashaya women:

> Some of the Promyshlenniks and Aleuts have married these Indian women. Our interpreter, whose wife is one of these people, told us that she had learned his language very quickly and well, and that she had also learned Aleut handicrafts, such as sewing the whale gut kamleika [waterproof outer garment] and other things. In one hut I saw a rather comely young woman preparing food, and when I approached her I was surprised that she spoke easily and in clear Russian. She invited me to eat her acorn porridge, and then complained about the rain. When I inquired I found that she had lived for some time in the Ross settlement with a promyshlennik, and then had returned to her people.

In an article on Russian and Aleut words which have been absorbed into the Kashaya language, Robert Oswalt (1988:20-22) gives not only examples of Russian words which apparently came directly from the ethnic Russians, but also numerous Russian words which the Kashaya learned from the Aleuts. These are distinguished by certain pronunciation peculiarities of the Aleuts which were taken by the Pomo even though they would have been perfectly able to render

the correct Russian form (for instance, the Aleuts replacing the Russian "b" with a "p", whereas the Kashaya have no trouble with the "b" sound).

In a brief biography of Talia Unuttaca, a Bodega Miwok woman, who married Andres Aulancoc, a Kodiak at Fort Ross. They had a dauaghter there in 1815, Maria. She then travelled with her husband to Sitka where she is baptized by a Russian Orthodox priest named Malancoc. When her husband died in 1819 she returned to Bodega Bay. There she established a relationship with a Bodega Miwok man named José and had a second daughter about 1820 named Rafaela (Jackson 1983:240).

KASHAYA ACCOUNTS

Among the many stories in the Kashaya Texts, nine of them appeared to clearly touch on the lives of the Kashaya at settlement Ross. The overwhelming majority of the accounts come from Herman James who learned them from his grandmother, Lukaria. This woman was said to have been born eight years before the Russians came which would have been about 1804. By contrast, only one of the stories told by Essie Parrish, who learned them from her father, relates to the Russian period. This would seem to be in line with the closer integration of Kashaya women into the Ross community than the men. Following is a brief synopsis of these nine stories:

> The First White Food [Essie Parrish]--the new arrivals offered the Indians food. At first the Indians feared this food would be poisonous and so dumped it out, buried it at times and kept to their traditional foods (Oswalt 1964:251).

This followed a pattern of fear of poisoning by strangers among the Pomo which is still found to a small degree today. However, over time the Indians became used to many of the introduced foods, especially as many of their own native foods were becoming harder to obtain.

> The Big Expedition [Herman James]--When a Hudson's Bay Company expedition consisting of 163 men, women and children passed Fort Ross on April 19, 1833 both the Indians and the Aleuts were puzzled and fearful of it. When they came close to where the Undersea people [Kashaya name for the men of colony Ross] were living, a few people straggled out and gave them some of what they [Indians and Russians (sic)] had to eat. They gave flour, being afraid. The strangers took it willingly at that time. After three or four days had passed some Indians having gone northwards saw what they had given all dumped out on the ground. They hadn't known what it was for. Everything they had received from the Undersea people, all of the food, had been dumped out. They had apparently just left it there on the trail.... After the people had passed the Indians and Aleuts asked one another who they had been. When they asked the Russians they received the response, "How come you don't know that the people you are asking about are your kind of people." "No, we don't recognize those people," said the Kashaya. (Oswalt 1964:253-255).

Elsewhere (Farris 1989) I have dealt with this story at greater length, however, one of the telling points is the gulf between the native peoples (California and Alaskan alike) and the Russian authorities who seemed to take the attitude that all Indians could be lumped together. Another point is that the food which was offered by the native peoples to these strangers was the flour, possibly in the form of a gruel ("kasha") which was the staple food provided the Indians by the Russians at this time, a point which was brought up to the Managers of the Russian-America Company by Baron Ferdinand Von Wrangel who visited a short time later (Gibson 1969). It is confusing to most English readers to read that the Indians were subsisting on flour when it was likely a coarser form of ground seed not unlike their favored pinole which was a normal staple.

> The Last Vendetta [Herman James]--This story begins by relating a tale of a feud between two groups of Kashaya which is suggested to have been common before the coming of the Russians. However, on this occasion, an "Undersea boy" mounted and armed with a rifle interrupted their rejoicing over the vengeance killing. The old people then decreed that they were done with the feuding. Some of the Indians then began going into the "cross-house" which belonged to the Undersea people [the Fort Ross chapel]. Thereafter there was no more enemy killing (Oswalt 1964:255-259).

This is a tribute to the Russian attempt to keep peace among the peoples with whom they associated by suppressing an age-old form of vengeance feuding which was not infrequently found among the California Indians. It also suggests that some of the Indians became interested in the orthodox religion. Late in the 19th century, when an orthodox bishop visited Fort Ross he was told of Lukaria who evidently still retained an affection for the Russians.

> Hunting Sea Otter and Farming [Herman James]--This is a somewhat confused tale of the comings and goings of the Aleuts and Russians to Alaska and elsewhere. Somehow the story became reversed in which people were initially at Fort Ross and then went to Alaska with the intention of hunting sea otters. The Indians came to realize how valuable the sea otters were to them. The Aleuts would pursue the hunt despite the considerable danger and privations (Oswalt 1964:261-265).

The only occupation described in this story for the Russians and Aleuts was the hunting of sea otter. The story suggests that when the rigors of sea otter hunting became too great, the "Undersea people" turned to growing crops in the vicinity of Fort Ross, aka Métini .

> Grain Foods [Herman James]--Wheat was planted in all the flat lands near Métini (Colony Ross). When ripe the people cut it by hand, tied it up and lay it there. Then they packed the sheaves in sea lion skins and dragged it to their houses. The grain was taken to a threshing floor "of earth packed down hard by wetting." The sheaves were placed there and horses driven in to trample the grain. When it was threshed they loaded it in sacks which were taken off to their warehouse. To make it into flour they

took it to a big machine called a "flour grinder." The sacks were tossed up and the grain was poured into the grinder. The resulting flour was then poured into sacks which were piled in a building to provide food for winter. An accident occurred when a woman got too close to the machinery and her hair was caught. She was spun around and killed. The woman was then taken home to be cremated in her traditional way. The story then compares the Indian way of gathering grain, knocking it into a tightly woven pack basket when it was ripe. This they would store in their own houses to use as pinole for winter use. The Indians observed the Russian methods and used the ground flour but also continued to use their pinole in their own way (Oswalt 1964:267-269).

The evident sense of continuity of their own methods of harvesting grain and those used by the agricultural Russians was evidently appreciated by the Kashaya. Their description of the threshing floor being of beaten earth differs from the tightly laid plank floors said to be used for this purpose in all the European accounts. The description of the use of stampeding horses to thresh the grain is substantiated by numerous other accounts of observers both at Fort Ross and in Spanish California. The story of the woman who got her hair caught and was killed brings up an intriguing comparison with a story of a similar tragic death retailed by the late-19th century romantic author, Gertude Atherton (1894). Though the latter story is clearly fiction, finding an antecedent in the Kashaya folk history enhances the impression that some such event actually occurred. The sense of cultural continuity is echoed in the observations of Cyrille LaPlace (1854; Farris 1988) who visited in August 1839, toward the end of the Russian period. LaPlace even remonstrated to his host, Alexander Rotchev, that the Russians were having very little obvious effect on the customs of the local Indians. Rotchev's reply was that they were, perhaps in more subtle ways, because the Indians were becoming increasingly sedentery and attached to the Fort.

The Wife Beater [Herman James]--This is the tale of a man [not specified whether Russian, Creole or Aleut] and an Indian woman living together. He awakes one day very angry and gets mean, eventually striking his wife with an axe. A sheriff then took the husband away and locked him up. He was shut in a "place where a little house was standing," locked up for a week. Hazel switches were brought to the settlement. The man was then brought out with his hands and feet tied and was whipped for a long time ("half a day") until he fell down unconscious. When he recovered, he repented and said that he now saw the path of righteousness. He told a public gathering that he had done wrong and would be good from then on. Even so, the Indian woman left the man. Interestingly, she continued living in the settlement, but stayed alone, as did the man (Oswalt 1964:269).

It appears that ill-treatment of the Kashaya wives was not at all condoned and that wife-beating was severely dealt with. The description of the jail as a little house standing by itself is very interesting. Although current interpretation at Fort Ross has a cell within the Official's Quarters inside the stockade, I believe this grew out of an unfortunate misreading of some documents describing the buildings at Fort Ross. A closer reading showed that

what was actually stated was that the jail was adjoining one of the warehouses inside the stockade. The severity of the whippings obviously made a deep impression on the Kashaya (see also the next story) and they were undoubtedly impressed with the sense of justice of the Russians to punish one of their own in such a fashion.

> The Suicide of a Wife [Herman James]--An Indian woman was married to an "Undersea man." They had been quarrelling. The man walked out of the house threatening to kill his wife if she were still there upon his return. He then left for work. The Indian woman finished eating, fed her children, went into the bedroom, and put on good new clothes. She then went off on a walk to the coastal cliff, but was followed by her child. When asked what she was doing, the mother said she was going "to die today." Although the child tried to grab her dress, the mother threw herself down onto the gravel beach. The child ran home. Others then came and carried her body back to her house. She was buried rather than cremated [this change in custom is particularly noted in the story]. When the husband returned home he was taken to the whipping place and whipped for a very long time ("almost a whole day"). He fell unconcious and died. He, too, was buried (Oswalt 1964:271).

This story also seems to impress one with the view that wrongs against the Indian wives were taken very seriously. There is ample indication that this woman was evidently well on her way to being acculturated. She was apparently living in one of the Russian style houses in the sloboda [village] adjacent to the stockade. The mention of her going into her bedroom to put on good new clothes, evidently a dress, before committing suicide is noteworthy. Also, there is the statement that after her death she was buried rather than cremated. It is not clear where she would have been buried. Presumably it would have been in the cemetery across the gulch from the stockade, but this is mere conjecture. If so she had clearly separated from her peoples' ways.

> Two Undersea Youths freeze to death [Herman James]--This was said to have occurred about ten years after the Russian arrival (i.e., circa 1822). It speaks of what must be creole children growing up. Two young men decide to go hunt coots and travel a long way down to the mouth of the Russian River (11 miles from Fort Ross). They get soaking wet in their endeavor and it is worsened by a heavy, cold rain. It appears that the boys become exhausted and ultimately die of exposure in the middle of the night (Oswalt 1964:273ff).

This could be seen as a cautionary tale against the dangers of wearing too much clothing. The Kashaya were said to have worn very little clothing. A modern-day Kashaya, Otis Parrish, son of Essie Parrish, explains that the Indian view of cold was that one learned to ignore it, that it affected only the outer layer of one's body, but did not penetrate. Considering the frequency with which the lack of clothing is noted among the California native peoples, it is evident that they were capable of standing very cold weather and had ways of psychologically dealing with the cold rather than resorting to heavy clothing.

Tales of Fort Ross [Herman James]--A boat with a white sail appeared off Métini. A boat landed and the "Undersea people" appeared. It was on this occasion that they got this name. When they landed they built houses close to where the Indians were. After awhile the Indians began working for them but after 30 years living there they returned home (Oswalt 1964:277ff).

Since the Russians would have initially arrived at the beach at Fort Ross in baidarkas or perhaps long boats, the image of the people appearing to come out of the sea would certainly have contributed to the name given them (the Undersea People). This story continues on through the period of the next occupants, a German immigrant and his family named Benitz (1843-1867) and the eventual forced departure from Fort Ross of the Indians under a subsequent owner. It paints a broad, though sketchy, picture of Kashaya history from just before the arrival of the Russians and Aleuts and carries it beyond as if to demonstrate the enduring nature of the Kashaya people in their homeland. Despite many comings and goings, they remain.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The series of nine stories paraphrased above give a rare vision of life in a Russian settlement as observed by the native peoples who became part of this life. In an earlier paper (Farris 1989) I was able to demonstrate the validity and accuracy of at least two stories told about Fort Ross, even to pinning down the event (the passing of a Hudson's Bay expedition). This would lend credence to the accuracy of other parts of the Kashaya oral history. It is hoped that as we delve more deeply into the archival material related to Fort Ross, we may find additional corroboration of some of the events portrayed, particularly the deaths, and perhaps the whippings. It may even be possible to ferret out the names of the individuals featured in these stories. The point of the exercise is to deepen our knowledge of the everyday lives of the people living in this settlement. This will supplement our moves toward expanding our archaeological search beyond the walls of the stockade (an enterprise already entered into by Professor Kent Lightfoot at the Aleut village site [cf. Lightfoot et al. 1991]) and see "Fort" Ross as it really was, a village of many cultures learning to live together.

REFERENCES CITED:

Atherton, Gertrude
1894 Natalie Ivanhoff: A Memory of Fort Ross. In Before the Gringo Came. J. Selwin Tait & Sons. New York.

Farris, Glenn J.
1988 A French Visitor's Description of the Fort Ross Rancheria in 1839. News from Native California 2(3):22-23.

1989 Recognizing Indian Folk History as Real History: A Fort Ross Example. American Indian Quarterly 13(4):471-480.

Fedorova, Svetlana Gr.
1975 Ethnic Processes in Russian America. Translated by Antoinette Shalkop. Occasional Paper No. 1. Anchorage Historical and Fine Arts Museum.

Gibson, James
1969 Russia in California, 1833: Report of Governor Wrangel. Pacific Northwest Quarterly 60(4):205-215.

Istomin, Alexei
n.d. The Indians at the Ross Settlement according to the Census by Kuskov in 1820 and 1821. Fort Ross Interpretive Association. In Press.

Jackson, Robert H.
1983 Intermarriage at Fort Ross: Evidence from the San Rafael Mission Baptismal Register. Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology 5(1&2):240-241.

Kalifornsky, Peter
1991 A Dena'ina Legacy, K'Tl'egh'i Sukdu: The Collected Writings of Peter Kalifornsky. Alaska Native Language Center. Fairbanks: University of Alaska.

Kari, James
1983 Kalifornsky, the Californian from Cook Inlet. Alaska in Perspective 5(1):1-10.

Kostromitinov, Peter
1839 Bemerkungen Über die Indianer in Ober-Kalifornien. IN Beitrage zur Kenntniss des Russischen Reiches und der angranzenden Lander Asiens, edited by K.E. v. Baer and Gr. v. Helmersen, pp. 80-96. Saint Petersburg, Russia.

La Place, Cyrille
1854 Campagne de Circumnavigation de la Frégate l'Artémise pendant les années 1837, 1838, 1839, et 1840 sous le commandement de M. La-Place, capitaine de vaisseau, Vol. 6. Firmin Didot Frères. Paris.

Lightfoot, Kent G., Thomas A. Wake, and Ann M. Schiff
1991 The Archaeology and Ethnohistory of Fort Ross, California. Contributions of the University of California Archaeological Research Facility No. 49. Berkeley, CA.

LÜtke, Fedor
1989 September 4-28, 1818. From the Diary of Fedor P. LÜtke during his Circumnavigation Aboard the Sloop Kamchatka, 1817-1819: Observations on California. IN The Russian American Colonies, Three Centuries of Russian Eastward Expansion 1798-1867, Vol. 3. A Documentary Record, edited and translated by Basil Dmytryshyn, E.A.P. Crownhart-Vaughan, and Thomas Vaughan, pp. 257-285. Oregon Historical Society Press, Portland.

Oswalt, Robert
1964 Kashaya Texts. University of California Publications in Linguistics No. 36.
1988 History through the words brought to California by the Fort Ross Colony. News from Native California 2(3):20-22.

Payeras, Mariano
1822 Diario de su Caminata con el Comisario del Imperio, Noticias sobre Ross. 1822. MS at Bancroft Library, Berkeley, CA.

von Wrangel, Ferdinand P.
1839 Statische und etnographische Nachrichten Über die Russischen Besitzungen an der Nordwestkuste von Amerika. IN Beitrage zur Kenntniss des Russischen Reiches und der Angranzenden Lander Asiens. Edited by K.E. v. Baer and Gr. v. Helmersen, pp.66-79. Saint Petersburg, Russia.

STATE OF CALIFORNIA — RESOURCES AGENCY
PETE WILSON, *Governor*

DEPARTMENT OF PARKS AND RECREATION
P.O. BOX 942896
SACRAMENTO 94296-0001

May 4, 1992

(916) 327-2089

Lyn Kalani
Fort Ross Interpretive Association
19005 North Coast Highway #1
Jenner, CA 95450

Dear Lyn,

Enclosed is the copy of the paper I presented to the Alaska Anthropological Association meetings in Fairbanks at the end of March. It is entitled, "Life at Fort Ross as the Indians saw it: Stories from the Kashaya.

Sorry that I will be unable to get to Sergei Serov's presentation. As I said on the phone, I already have two commitments to drive to Fort Ross within a two week period and simply can't manage a third. At any rate, I hope to see you on Saturday the 16th when I come up for the Archaeology Week talks. It should be fun.

All the Best,

Glenn

Glenn Farris, Associate Archeologist
Archeology Lab
2572 Port Street
West Sacramento, CA 95691

Encl.