



19005 Coast Highway One, Jenner, CA 95450 ■ 707.847.3437 ■ info@fortross.org ■ www.fortross.org

Title: **The Romance of Fort Ross**

Author(s): **Gertrude Atherton**

Published by: California Illustrated Magazine

Source: Fort Ross Conservancy Library

URL: www.fortross.org

Fort Ross Conservancy (FRC) asks that you acknowledge FRC as the source of the content; if you use material from FRC online, we request that you link directly to the URL provided. If you use the content offline, we ask that you credit the source as follows: “Courtesy of Fort Ross Conservancy, www.fortross.org.”

Fort Ross Conservancy, a 501(c)(3) and California State Park cooperating association, connects people to the history and beauty of Fort Ross and Salt Point State Parks.

© Fort Ross Conservancy, 19005 Coast Highway One, Jenner, CA 95450, 707-847-3437

CALIFORNIA JILL MAG V 5
DEC 1893 No. 1, pg 57-62

DUP
CALIFORNIA SECTION
STATE LIBRARY

THE ROMANCE OF FORT ROSS.

57

despair and then there came through the telephone, loudly but familiarly, "Theodore!" and I found my wife shaking my arm and expostulating against my screaming in my sleep. I

had been dreaming. My library fire still blazed brightly, and Van Reed's Patent Submarine Parachute was not needed to carry the news of that Christmas experience.

THE ROMANCE OF FORT ROSS.

BY GERTRUDE ATHERTON.

THE missions of California have been exploited at such length and so loudly, so monotonously and impressively, that it is little wonder both native and tourist have accepted them as our only monuments of historical interest. And yet high on the northern coast, secluded in their fastness between the mountains and the sea, are "ruins" quite as significant and interesting as the crumbling adobe walls of San Diego and San Juan Capistrano.

Few there are who have not read (and recited!) Bret Harte's poem celebrating Concepcion Arguello, one of the most famous women of the old Californians. Fort Ross, whose brief eventful career is the subject of this paper, owed its birth and rise to the wisdom and executive genius of her lover. The great Russian fur company at Alaska being threatened with starvation during the long unproductive winters, its Governor, Alexander Rezanof, determined to establish a branch company on the fertile coasts of the Californias and supply the mother colony with the necessaries of life so richly yielded by the wild, beautiful dependence of Mexico. He accordingly visited San Francisco and held conference with Arguello, Commandante of the Presidio, and obtained reluctant consent to his scheme. But both demand and consent were mere formalities as Russian and Spaniard knew. The northern coast, where Rezanof proposed to colonize, was separated from the Spanish settlements by miles of almost impenetrable

forest and valleys jealously guarded by Indians. No army would have reached Fort Ross in condition to fight. And although Mexico might bluster—as she did—she had other use for troops than to waste them on a small and friendly foe.

Meanwhile, Rezanof in love with the beautiful, vivacious daughter of the commandante, won her heart and her father's consent. The proposed union met with the approval of both Russians and Spanish, being regarded as a token of permanent peace; but although the peace was found to need no cementing, the lovers had no such pleasant destiny. Rezanof returning to St. Petersburg to lay his plans before the Czar and to obtain the royal consent to his marriage, was thrown from his horse and killed. Concepcion gave up the world as soon as the news was brought to her, retiring to a secluded room in the great De la Guerra mansion at Santa Barbara until the Monterenas erected a convent and asked her to be its abbess. To her went the daughters of the aristocratic families to be educated. The very old Californian women of the upper classes who are now dying off were all taught by her, and describe her as a calm sweet-faced woman, always gowned in a gray habit fastened at the throat with a cross.

But Rezanof's plans matured as rapidly as if directed by his own energetic hand. The Russians settled within the year on the spot he had chosen. They called the place Fort

Ross, from the same root as the word Russia, and established a branch colony a few miles below at Bodega Bay.

Fort Ross has been selected for its timber, its natural defences, the admirable farming land in its vicinity, the seals on its coast and the otters in its forest. That it was a spot of ideal beauty probably went for little in the selection, but was doubtless appreciated later on by the exiles, aristocratic and humble. A lofty mountain spiked thick with redwoods describes a semi-circle about three fertile tablelands each sloping gently to the one below; the lowest and finest ends with the cliffs. The cove so formed is about two miles wide and one deep at the midmost point; the mountain tapers at each end of the arc, looking as if extending long determined arms to grasp the cliffs and guard the spot between for whosoever should be wise enough to elect to dwell therein. The forests at dusk look like a black wall, nothing could be denser, darker, gloomier. As you approach a great wave of cold air rushes out to greet you, but if you venture within, there is beauty of fern and creek and rolling, wreathing fog, grandeur of aisle and silence to offset the chill and the gloom.

A few yards beyond the forest all is light and pastoral strangely mingled now with death and decay. Cows nibble at grass that the fog keeps green from winter to winter, the few modern buildings are simple and pleasing; but two tottering bastions, unlike anything in modern California, and a delapidated chapel of Greek architecture arrest the eye and arouse anger at the indifference of the owner; while on a lonely knoll between the forest and the gray ponderous ocean, flanked on either side by wild beautiful gulches, are fifty or more graves of dead and gone Russians, with not a line to preserve the ego, once so mighty. The rains have washed the mounds almost flat, thrown down the crosses, doubtless filled the graves.

And in one of them a beautiful girl is said to sleep in a copper coffin.

The highest intelligence directed all that the Russians did. They erected a quadrilateral stockade of redwood beams pierced with embrasures for cannonades. At diagonal corners were graceful bastions furnished with cannon. Mounted cannon were at each of the four gates and a number were ranged about the plaza; sentries paced the ramparts. At the southeast corner was a Greek chapel, surmounted by cupola and cross, magnificent within; the pictures were in jeweled frames and the ornaments were of gold and silver. Since then it has been a stable, and to-day it is as decrepit as a man in his third childhood. It takes imagination to reconstruct it, dim and odorous with incense and filled with the music of its silver chimes.

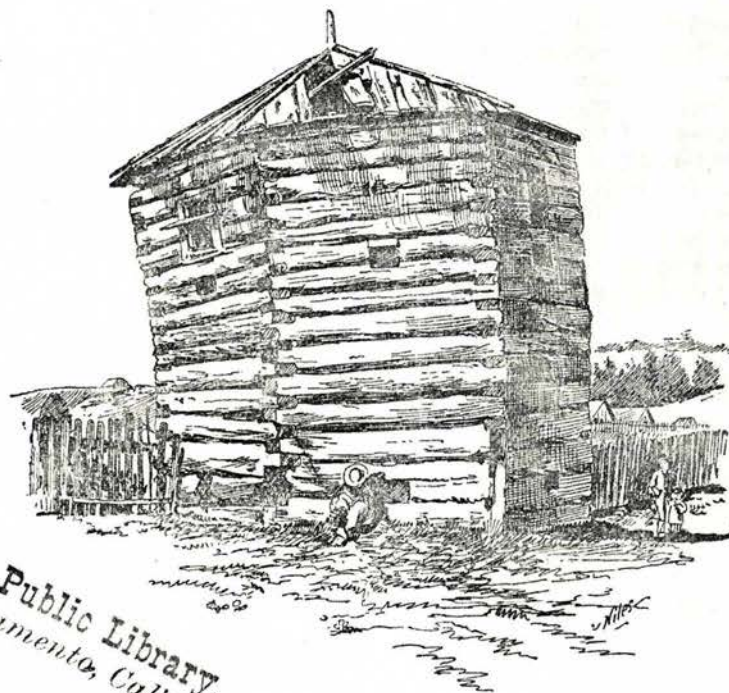
The Governor's and officer's quarters were in a long low building, built of redwood logs and so skilfully constructed that it stands intact to-day. At right angles to it is another building of similar architecture which did duty as barracks. Granaries, storehouses—one with a cellar for treasure, so the story runs—an armory, a dance hall, were also within the enclosure; and without was the "town," a collection of some 800 huts occupied by Indians and Russians—the latter convicts for the most part—the servants of the company. On a cliff, across the gulch were the warehouses and conveniences for ship-building. Over the mountain, beyond the redwood forest, were the skilfully managed farms whose products amply justified Rezânof's judgment.

Secure in their fortress, the Russians were only menaced once. The slaves of the "town" caught and skinned the seals and otters with utmost precision; if they did not they were flogged; tradition has it that the more unruly were beheaded down on the rocks, the bodies thrown to the waiting devil-fish and crabs. The Governor, despite his exile, managed to

Free
Suet

pass t
his dt
could
riously
his F
his de
deer to
fields
these
palled
rode C
San I
royall
dante
Mont
and a
made
lovin
life
seen.

It
histo
can l
The
what
roma



Free Public Library,
Sacramento, Cal'a.

RUINS OF BASTION AT FORT ROSS.

pass the time very agreeably. When his duties did not absorb him, he could read French novels in his luxuriously furnished house, eat the viands his French cook prepared, and drink his delicate wines. In the forest were deer to hunt and bear to trap, and the fields ran wild with quail. When these imported and bucolic pleasures palled he sprang on his horse and rode down the coast to the Presidio of San Francisco where he was always royally welcomed by the Commandante, perchance he pushed on to Monterey, capital of the Californias, and as honored guest of the Governor, made merry with those gay, laughter-loving people of an Arcadian court life whose like the world has never seen.

It is not necessary to give further historical data of Fort Ross; all that can be found in Hittell and Bancroft. The object of this paper is to set forth what is preserved of its legend and romance.

Life at Fort Ross, save for the occasional *amour* of a Governor and an Indian maiden, was prosaic enough until the advent of the last Governor, Alexander Rotscheff and his beautiful bride, the Princess Helene de Gagarin. The latter was a blonde of the purest and most exquisite Russian type, brilliant, amiable, and the possessor of a Parisian wardrobe which made her bloom like an orchard in a desert. Fort Ross at once became gay as the court of Monterey. Cavalcades of Californians—the men in lace and silk and silver, gold embroidered serapes and silver on their gray sombreros, their horses trapped with silk and silver; the women gay in flowered silken gowns, the rebosa or mantilla draped about their graceful heads came sixty miles and often more to dance for a week in the halls of the Russians. During the day these indefatigable pleasure-seekers raced over the cliffs or wandered through the redwoods. On Sunday afternoons dinner

was served in the orchard, a large enclosure half way up the mountain ; a delightful spot with paths winding around and over the knolls, the cool, dark, musical forest curving about the sides, a glimpse of the ocean through the leafy branches of the fruit trees and a long summerhouse, gay with the colors of Russia, wherein was spread the feast.

Dufter de Inofras writes enthusiastically of the elegance and luxury of the Russians at this period. It certainly required both determination and brains to rise above the primitive meagre civilization. The Rotscheffs did everything that ingenuity could devise to make time pass ; they even had a swing in the plaza to which the Princess and her guests would run when all else failed, and command some Indian retainer to work his stalwart arms in their behalf. On national holidays certain men of the "town" were allowed to enter the gates and wrestle in the plaza for the benefit of the house party on the verandah, the officers and soldiers. Others wrestled on the cliffs to a humbler but no less appreciative audience. It is recorded that they even had fireworks which must have made that sombre spot infernal on a dark night.

During the long winter months, when the rains turned the forest into an impassable marsh, and swept, gray and cold and incessant over the tableland and the invisible booming ocean, the Princess Helene yawned in her luxurious drawingroom, strummed the piano or sought consolation in the French novel and the society of her handsome husband. But at best it was an unsatisfactory life for a brilliant and fashionable woman, and after the novelty wore thin she doubtless longed faithfully for Paris and Petersburg. Her exile lasted but a few years, happily, and towards its close was in the way of being rounded off by a climax of a highly exciting nature. Prince Solano, Chief of all the Sonoma Indians, saw her as she rode home from a great fête at General

Vallejo's, and became promptly and mightily smitten with her blonde loveliness. He vowed he would have her in spite of the forty cannons of Fort Ross and forthwith summoned all the chiefs and tribes of the Mayacumas Range to his aid. He was a powerful and popular neighbor ; dusky battalions swarmed to his standard, and the plan of attack was laid before them. They would storm the Fort by night, spike with arrows all who resisted and in the height of the confusion, while flames leapt and smoke blinded, Solano would snatch the beautiful Princess from the ruins and carry her off to his mountain lair, which, for all that is known to the contrary, may have been a "big tree." But alas ! before the army was in marching order, some traitor discovered the plot to General Vallejo, who advised the amorous prince to disband and forbear lest he and his followers be exterminated by the combined armies and navies of Mexico and Russia. And Solano, who had great respect for General Vallejo, sighed, and sacrificed his passion to the good of his race. Rotscheff thought that all things considered, it was time to go. The seals and otters were giving out, General Sutter made a reasonable offer for the land, and in 1841 the Russians departed forever, after a peaceful and profitable sojourn of thirty years.

Shortly before leaving, Rotscheff with a party of friends made a pilgrimage to the interior, ascended the highest peak of the Mayacunas Range and inserting a copper plate in its apex, christened the peak Mt. St. Helene after his wife.

General Sutter, finding Fort Ross a white elephant, sold it to a young man named Bennett, also a bridegroom. But Bennett was not a bridegroom of unleavened happiness, being much disturbed as to his financial future. He had paid a large sum of money for the property and in what manner to make the property reimburse him was a question revolved in his own mind

and
day an
agem
thing
his w
awok
able,
of the
" F
ition
potat
WI
cover
tion
exper
and r
Th
ous

PH 11

can
bea
Fai
of C
only
tle,
ma
mac
saw
tair
esq
wa

and discussed with his young wife day and night. Then—here is encouragement for the Occultists—a strange thing happened. One night he and his wife suddenly and simultaneously awoke to behold a tall, gray, venerable, transparent Russian looming out of the dark.

"Plant potatoes!" cried the apparition in a loud voice. "Plant potatoes!" and he vanished.

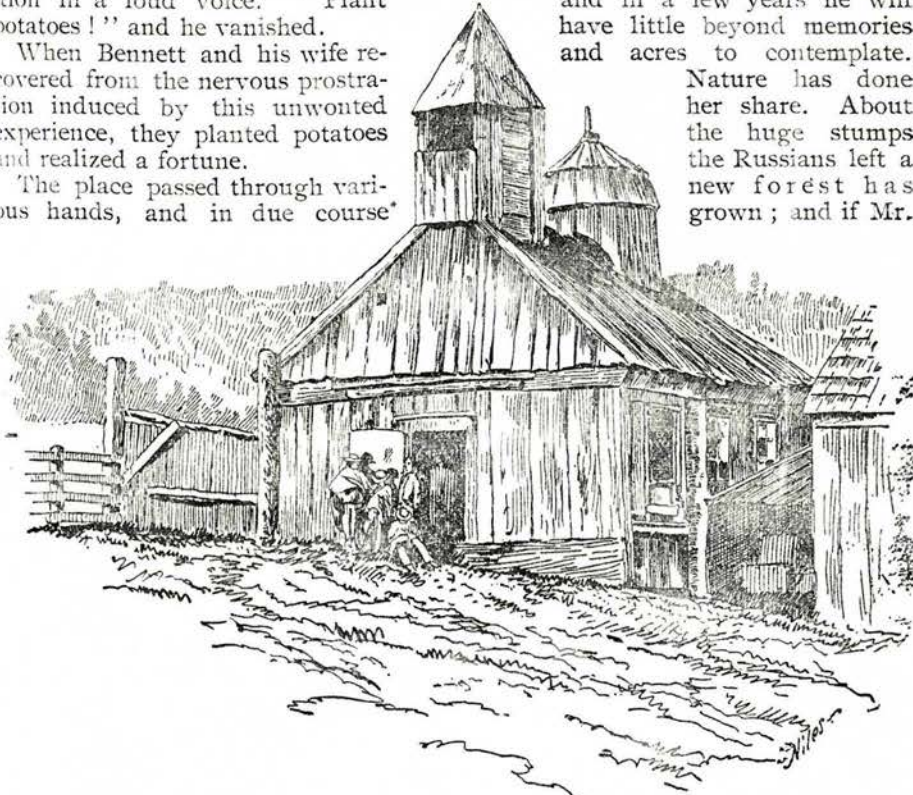
When Bennett and his wife recovered from the nervous prostration induced by this unwonted experience, they planted potatoes and realized a fortune.

The place passed through various hands, and in due course

times. But Mrs. Fairfax's beauty, both stately and dashing, her luxury and her splendid toilettes are part of the reminiscences of the place.

Mr. Call, the present owner of Fort Ross—and of many thousand acres round about—takes great pride in his historical possessions, but unfortunately his pride stops short of repair, and in a few years he will have little beyond memories and acres to contemplate.

Nature has done her share. About the huge stumps the Russians left a new forest has grown; and if Mr.



RUINS OF GREEK CHAPEL, FORT ROSS.

came to be the possession of another beautiful and brilliant woman. Mrs. Fairfax, wife of Charles Fairfax, Baron of Cameron, a Virginian, noted as the only American owner of an English title, bought it in partnership with a man named Dixon, and for a time made large sums of money with her sawmills. She also did much entertaining, and if it was not as picturesque as the Princess Helene's, that was the fault of the prosaic American

Call does not repair neither does he devastate, for no one dare fell a tree on his land.

Many are the traditions of murders and ghosts. A man of the "town" once flung his wife over the cliffs, cracking her in small pieces on the jagged rocks below. Another wife went over of her own account, doubtless preferring the initiative. Straggling up the mountain were huts, more or less isolated. In one of them,

its back windows looking into the forest, dwelt a young Russian with a Californian woman of the people, a beautiful girl who had come as hand-maiden to one of the Princess Helene's Southern guests. The couple had a child and were very happy, ideally so. Rotscheff was kind and gave them their solitude; the wife never mingled with the rougher members of the town. One night the husband returned home to find his wife and child murdered. As none of the household possessions were touched nor the house burnt, Indians were evidently not the criminals, and suspicion settled upon a former lover. He could not be taken, however, and the husband, when the fruitless search was over, killed himself. The cottage was never occupied again; the cradle, years afterward, was seen untouched in the corner where the child had been murdered; superstition kept even the curious away; and the Castilian roses climbed gayly over the little house, and the panthers came out at night and prowled about it, until, beaten by the east winds that drive so furiously through the gorge in winter and rotted by rain, it fell to earth, and not a board remains to mark the spot.

There is a story of a beautiful Russian girl whose ghost used to appear carrying a copper box studded with nails in which were the letters of a lover who had died on his way to Sitka; but it is very mixed and is, I strongly suspect, a branch of the Rezánof-Arguello episode. She used to sit on this box in the moonlight, let down her hair (golden) and moan loud and long. Perhaps she too loved Resenoff, and, having been scorned, does not sleep as peacefully as Concepcion.

While I was visiting Fort Ross last

winter, Mr. Morgan, the proprietor of the hotel, after much kind effort finally induced an old woman, half Russian half Indian, to come down from her mountain fastness and talk to me. She was the oldest inhabitant, having hidden when the Russians left, that she might not be forced to go with them. She was wholly Indian in appearance, her face unwrinkled, but strangely ruttled and moth-patched. Her white teeth glittered like porcelain and her eyes were as black and bright as glass; but her hair was grizzled and hung in ragged wisps about her face. She was bent, but needless to say, as colorless in attire as an April meadow. She talked—through an interpreter—of the Princess, whom she had extravagantly admired, particularly as to hair. I told her that the place was said to be *haunted* by several generations of ghosts, and that these same intruders came out at night and rolled huge stones through the church and down the corridors. Much to my regret I had not heard the stones and I asked her if she had. She shook her head scornfully at these commonplace manifestations, but assured me and at great length, that Fort Ross used to fairly swarm with apparitions of red-headed dwarfs. They did not appear to have any object in swarming beyond showing themselves and frightening people half to death, particularly the Princess, who had no use for them whatever.

Some cultivated millionaire should buy Fort Ross, and erecting a stone house of mediæval architecture on the very face of the cliffs, where the roar of the ocean could be heard at its best, and give such brilliant house parties and splendid fêtes as are due to the traditions of the place.

DUP
CALIFORNIA SECTION
STATE LIBRARY

Free Pub
Sacram



identity
develop
prises a
and she
of prais
ization
wisdom
her ov
and pe
More t
and in
cosmo
don, I
she is
beauty
line th
end o
entert
is will
the gr
It
minded