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Who was Ivan Kuskov?

by [Breck Parkman](#) on Thursday, April 19, 2012 at 11:00pm ·

[This is the text of the keynote address I gave at the "Special Luncheon to Celebrate the 200th Anniversary of the Return of Ivan Kuskov to Port Rumiantsev," which was organized by the Rancho Bodega Historical Society and hosted by the Bodega Bay Chamber of Commerce, Bodega Bay, California, April 5, 2012.]

Today, we gather on the shoreline of Bodega Bay to observe the 200-year anniversary of Ivan Kuskov's successful return to this harbor and his founding of Colony Ross. What a beautiful place to hold this observance and what a wonderful audience to participate in this event. I am honored to be here.

Imagine if someday we ourselves should be remembered with words and phrases like this: Brilliant, decisive, quick to act, kind hearted, cheerful, faithful, and courteous, having audacity and resourcefulness, imperiousness and toughness, and characterized by steady diligence, noble behavior, high honesty, and steadfast zeal for the common welfare of all, with an aspiration to know the world. That was Ivan Kuskov, reflected in the words of both his peers and biographers.

Ivan Aleksandrovich Kuskov was born in 1765, in the town of Totma, 400 miles northeast of Moscow, a few years after Catherine the Great had begun her rule. Fifty-eight years later, Kuskov would die in Totma and be buried there. But he did not spend his life there. Ivan Kuskov saw much of the world; he explored new territories, and had many grand adventures, some of them fraught with great difficulty and danger. Without a doubt, his greatest achievement was the founding of Colony Ross, here on the shores of northern California, on the other side of the world from Totma. Naturally, the considerable distance between these two places can be measured in miles, but it can also be measured by the amount of passion and energy and conviction that is necessary to make the long journey. Some of our honored guests who are assembled here today can likely attest to that measurement. The trip from Totma to Fort Ross is a long one, even today. In his creation of Colony Ross, Kuskov successfully constructed a bridge between Russia and America. That bridge survives today, as evidenced by the people in this room.

Kuskov was born to a middle class family, the same class that accounted for many of Russia's public servants and merchants. In 1787, at the age of 22, Kuskov departed Totma for Siberia, as many adventurous Russians of his time were doing. It is apparent that Kuskov had fallen on bad times, and as a result was badly in debt, perhaps that explaining the impetus for his departure. Kuskov's trip to Siberia was not entirely legal, as he lacked the necessary passport required of Russians for internal travel. Perhaps it was this quasi-illegal status of his that initially led Kuskov to the Russian American Company and, eventually, on to Bodega Bay and Fort Ross.

In 1787, Kuskov traveled to eastern Siberia, where, in Irkutsk, he met Alexander Baranov. Baranov would later negotiate a contract with the business men, Grigory Shelikhov and his partner, Ivan Golikov, both of them rising commercial figures in Irkutsk. In his contractual arrangement with these men, Baranov agreed to go to Alaska, where he would help manage the trading post they had recently established on Kodiak Island. In 1799, the trading company that Shelikhov and Golikov began was renamed the Russian American Company.

On August 17, 1790, Baranov concluded his contract with Shelikhov and Golikov, which specified that he, Baranov, would be allowed to take two assistants of his own choice to Alaska. Baranov quickly hired Kuskov to be his assistant and Kuskov became Baranov's right-hand man, remaining so for the duration of Baranov's time with the Russian American Company.

Kuskov traveled with Baranov on the long overland trail linking the city of Irkutsk with the coastal town of Okhotsk, in the Russian Far East. The "trail" involved a horseback trip of more than 160 miles from Irkutsk to the Lena River, sailing down the Lena River for 1,200 miles, and then traveling by foot or horseback the arduous 450 miles east to Okhotsk. The trip to Alaska continued by sailing ship, crossing the temperamental Sea of Okhotsk and the North Pacific Ocean, before making landfall in Alaska. Even today, this is a long and difficult journey. In 1790, it separated the hardy and adventurous from all those too timid to try.

Once in Alaska, Kuskov set to work for Baranov. Kuskov served as manager of the redoubt on Prince William Sound, and commanded long-distance sea otter hunting parties that traveled as far south as the Northwest Coast and California. Prior to 1804, Kuskov served as manager of the main establishment on Kodiak Island whenever Baranov was away. After 1804, he became the 2nd in command at the newly created Russian settlement at Sitka. Between 1808 and 1811, Kuskov made several voyages to California seeking a location for a new colony. In 1812, he sailed back to California aboard the *Chirikov*, with orders to create Colony Ross.

As Kuskov's men set about building their new settlement in California, Napoleon Bonaparte led his 500,000-strong French army across the border in an ill-fated invasion of Russia, and a young United States declared war on a more powerful Great Britain, thus initiating the War of 1812. Closer to home, members of the local Coast Miwok nations were lured, coerced, or forced into servitude in the Spanish missions that had been constructed by the Franciscans in San Francisco and San Jose. The world was in a state of flux and Kuskov's return to California was but a small part of it.

Once back in California, Kuskov chose a site for the new outpost and then he and his men set about constructing the fortified settlement we know today as Fort Ross. A wooden stockade was erected, inside which were built working and living structures. In time, a thriving multi-cultural community sprang up outside the fort's walls.

But what of the founder himself, this man who we know as Ivan Kuskov? Understanding the creation of Fort Ross, and the very presence of that settlement here on the coast of northern California, requires that we understand the man, Kuskov.

What has always impressed me most about Fort Ross is the fact that Kuskov was able to create the settlement and hold on to it for all those years without the use of violence. It was a rather violent time in California's history, as Spanish forces and institutions attempted to wrestle control of the state's natural resources and indigenous peoples. That struggle was written in the blood of the people. But onto this scene came Ivan Kuskov, with his lofty ideals and his powerful cannon. How did he manage to create Colony Ross and never once have to fire his cannons to defend it?

In June, 1802, Kuskov led a large party of Alaskan hunters on an excursion from Kodiak to southeastern Alaska. While he was hunting, the Russian settlement at Sitka was attacked by the local Tlingit Indians. The Tlingit succeeded in taking the settlement, killing the twenty Russian men and 130 Aleuts, capturing the women and children, and torching the various wooden structures. Further north near Yakutat, Kuskov's party was attacked as well and had to fight for their lives. Two years later, Baranov led a large contingent of Russians and Native Alaskans in the retaking of Sitka and was badly wounded in the process. Kuskov accompanied Baranov and from that time on was his 2nd in command at Sitka. In 1805, some of the Tlingit, including some who were the servants of the Russians, rose up once again, this time destroying the settlement at Yakutat and massacring forty of the Russians – men, women, and children - in the process. Kuskov had spent time at Yakutat and knew many of the dead. The Tlingit uprisings undoubtedly affected him. Kuskov understood the importance of treating the local indigenous people fairly and showing them the respect they deserved, and he knew that it was important to reconcile any differences and grievances before they could explode in violence. Now Kuskov realized the dire consequences of any failure to do so.

Prior to having founded Fort Ross, Kuskov entered into a common-law marriage with the daughter of an Indian chief from southeast Alaska. This was probably in 1810. The woman's name was Ekaterina Prokhorovna, suggesting that she had been baptized prior to her marriage to Kuskov, and that her godfather's name was Prokhor. What is most interesting is that Ekaterina was Tlingit, the very tribe that had only recently risen up in resistance to the Russian presence in southeastern Alaska. While it is not clear to me how Kuskov came to marry Ekaterina, the importance of his marrying the daughter of a Tlingit chief during the time of the Russian-Tlingit reconciliation cannot be understated. Rather than a marriage of convenience, however, Kuskov and his bride appear to have enjoyed their life together. When Kuskov sailed to California in 1812, Ekaterina went along with him and she lived at Fort Ross for the ten years he was there. They built their house within the stockade walls, and furnished it with the trappings of their position, including a piano. Portraits of the two of them were painted while at Fort Ross, possibly in 1813. These portraits provide us an opportunity to look into their eyes and to wonder about their lives. Kuskov is depicted wearing the single-breasted coat of a Commerce Councilor, and he has a ribbon around his neck, from which is suspended the gold medal awarded him in 1804 for his diligence. Ekaterina is wearing a lace-edged dress with shawl, and around her neck, a strand of smooth pearls. The two appear reserved and dignified, as would be expected of such an occasion.

When Kuskov was recalled from Fort Ross, after his ten years of service there, he took Ekaterina with him. They sailed to Sitka and from there on to Russia aboard the *Chirikov*, the same ship that had brought the two of them to California ten years earlier. Along the way, the ship stopped at Kodiak and while there, Kuskov and his common-law wife were properly married in the monastery by Hieromonk Afarasii. From Kodiak, the *Chirikov* delivered the Kuskov's to Okhotsk, from where they embarked on their long overland trek to St. Petersburg and then on to Totma. Kuskov died the year after he arrived in Totma. Three years later, Ekaterina remarried, this time to an alcohol sales supervisor by the name of Popov. In 1990, the Kuskov History Museum was opened in Totma, in order to commemorate one of its most famous citizens. The portraits that were made of the Kuskov's at Fort Ross are displayed in the museum.

In 1812, as Kuskov supervised the construction of Fort Ross, the Tlingit uprisings were undoubtedly on his mind. While the local Kashaya Pomo and Bodega Miwok appeared to be friendly, even encouraging of his settlement, Kuskov had to wonder if the tragic events of Sitka might repeat themselves here on the remote shores of Nova Albion. As a defense, Kuskov had his men construct a mighty fortress of hand-hewn redwood and arm it with their many powerful cannon. Furthermore, the men armed themselves with musket and saber, and conducted regular militia drills, determined not to be caught unprepared.

While Kuskov may have worried about an Indian attack in 1812, he used his common sense to ward off any such possibility. By treating the local people with respect and dignity, Kuskov mitigated most of the uncomfortableness they might have felt with his settlement's presence.

Furthermore, Kuskov punished any of his men who were caught abusing local Indian women. This was appreciated by the local tribes. Many of the men, both Russian and Alaskan, took wives among the local Kashaya Pomo and Bodega Miwok. In most cases, the marriages were successful, created a sense of community at Ross, and provided the colony with a multitude of children. In many instances, the men took their wives and children back to Alaska and Russia, when their service at Colony Ross ended.

Although Kuskov and other company officials had arranged with the local Pomo and Miwok for the use of their lands, not all of the tribesmen agreed with the Russian presence. In the census that Kuskov prepared for Ross Colony in 1820-1821, a number of Indian men are listed as serving time at Fort Ross or at the hunting artel on South Farallon Island. Their crimes, such as killing the "best" horses and burning the wheat fields, suggest some level of active resistance was underway within the Russian colony. This resistance became much more common in the 1830s, long after Kuskov had departed Fort Ross.

Although Kuskov pursued agriculture more and more while he was at Fort Ross, especially after 1817, he never once forced the local tribal people to assist in the endeavor, unless they did so willingly. Nor did he force their participation in any other venture. The decision to participate appears to have always been left to the Kashaya and Bodega Miwok people. However, by the 1830s, the Russians were so desperate for farm workers that they took to impressing large groups of native people,

and forcing them to work for months at a time. One account, from the mid-1830s, notes a slaving raid made on the inhabitants of an area near present-day Healdsburg, in which more than 150 men, women, and children were herded to the Kostrimitinov Ranch on Willow Creek and forced to harvest the crops. Naturally, such desperate actions intensified native resistance, and the understandable resolve to rid their land of all foreigners, Spanish, Californio, and Russian. The fact that Mariano Vallejo was already engaged in a military struggle against the Southern Pomo and Wappo at this time only made the Fort Ross situation more tenuous.

Whereas it is telling to contrast Kuskov's treatment of the native people around Fort Ross to that of the Spanish around San Francisco Bay, it is also worth contrasting his treatment to that afforded native people by the later managers of Fort Ross. In any such comparison, Kuskov is exceptional. Whereas the local Pomo and Miwok were afforded protection by the company managers following Kuskov, that was not always the case with the tribes people living further inland. However, during Kuskov's tenure, Russians could freely roam far inland from Fort Ross and never worry about being molested by the local native people. That was certainly not true for the Spanish residents around San Francisco Bay, nor was it true of Russians in the years after Kuskov's departure. Again, Ivan Kuskov was an exceptional man and his exceptional intellect and good will allowed Fort Ross to function in ways that were not possible in the years after his departure. Eventually, the souring relationship with some of the local tribes may have indirectly undermined the stability and efficiency of the colony and thus added to its final demise in 1841.

Kuskov's abilities are also evident in his handling of the Spanish objection to the presence of Colony Ross. When a small delegation of Spanish soldiers appeared at Fort Ross in mid-October, 1812, Kuskov was cordial, and even invited the Spanish officer in charge of the soldiers to look around the newly constructed settlement. At this point, Kuskov probably already knew that the Spanish garrison in San Francisco was no match for his well-armed employees. And whereas the few Spanish cannon at the San Francisco Presidio were in disrepair, Kuskov had brought with him numerous cannon, all in fine shape. The Spanish officer in charge of the delegation took note of that fact. I cannot imagine that Kuskov ever considered the Spanish a military threat. But the political threat they represented was a different matter.

Although the Spanish authorities objected to the presence of Fort Ross, relations between the people of San Francisco and Fort Ross were remarkably warm and supportive. A considerable amount of commerce and exchange was carried on between the two communities. At the time of the founding of Fort Ross, Alta California was under the charge of Governor José Joaquín de Arrillaga. Although Governor Arrillaga was officially opposed to the Russian presence, he did not press the issue and thus unofficially allowed for the mutually beneficial exchange between the Spanish and Russian communities. When Governor Arrillaga died two years later, he was replaced with a very different personality, José de Argüello, a man who pressed home the Spanish case for the abandonment of Colony Ross. For the remainder of Kuskov's time at Ross, the Spanish authorities worked diligently against his success. The creation of Mission San Rafael in 1817, near the southern border of Colony Ross, was one way they attempted to thwart the feared expansion of the Russian colony. In 1823, the

Mexican authorities approved the creation of Mission San Francisco Solano in what is now the town of Sonoma, for that very same reason.

Throughout his career with the Russian American Company, Kuskov showed great resolve and intellect, and it was in these innate abilities that he found success. Kuskov was not a very educated man, and he spoke no languages but his own, unlike the other managers that followed him at Fort Ross. He had a wooden leg and walked with the aid of a crutch. He had a temper, but also the patience and good sense to temper it. He genuinely cared about people and this allowed him to become a leader that others would follow. Indeed, when Kuskov passed through Kodiak on his way home to Totma, in 1822, the local Russian manager was warned to be wary of Kuskov, for he still held the respect of the old-timers and his influence might prove a distraction in a Russian American Company no longer guided by Kuskov's old friend, Alexander Baranov.

In his later years, Kuskov was recommended for the prestigious Cross of St. Vladimir, a medal that he did not live to see. Kuskov died a relatively poor man, leaving an estate of just over 70,000 rubles. Having no children, the estate went to his wife, Ekaterina. In spite of Kuskov's success, some have said that he had little to show for the 31 years he spent with the Russian American Company. As we all know, of course, one's legacy is calculated by much more than the size of an estate at death. Other men, much, much richer than Ivan Kuskov, also died in 1823, and precious few of them are still remembered today. We remember Ivan Kuskov, not because of his wealth, but because of his ideas, his ideals, and his deeds. We are reminded of him today, on this 200th anniversary of his return to Bodega Bay, and we will be reminded of him for many years to come. Ivan Kuskov built a bridge that linked Russia and America, and we all travel it still. For this, we owe him our eternal gratitude.