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## "FORT ROSS - RUSSIAN SETTLEMENT IN AMERICA"

(Judith A. Harkison)

On a high rocky shore of northern California stands a lone old Fort, surrounded by a stockade, with a block house of logs, with an old cannon and two time darkened weathered buildings. The coastal highway twisting in these places above the ocean, passing through the Fort, dividing the right angle in two parts. A yellow road sign reminds guides that they must decrease speed. To one side of the road can be seen a chapel (see photo below), the oldest orthodox church in the U.S.A. On the other side of the highway can be seen, abandoned by the owner, a home of the Administrator of the Fort. Built in 1812 the home was considered to be the second in the "age" of log construction in the American West. The village, known as Fort Ross was established 155 years ago by Russian agriculturists and hunters of the fur animals. Located only 130 kilometers north of San Francisco it was the most westerly point of Russian possessions in North America. Presently, the Fort, a picturesque placement among the California vineyards and majestic Sequoia, became a museum managed by the State. Hundreds of studying tourists and historians gather here in the summertime since Fort Ross is one of the most interesting pages of the early history of California. Not only exhibits in the two remaining buildings of the Fort but the very atmosphere of the old fortress hardly can be compared with something similar in the United States. The church was built from "Sequoia" in 1815. In it until this time are located preserved orthodox items, an ancient church-lustre, and other church utensils. On the cast-iron bell a lettering in Russian text "Cast in Saint Petersburg at the firm of the first guild, "Michael Makarov Stukolkin." (The bell in its time was moved from Fort Ross and from 1866 through 1961 served as a fire bell in the nearby village of Petaluma). From the earthquake of 1906 the church suffered greatly but was rebuilt. The home of the Administrator, the right-angle building under the tarred sharp-pointed roof, served at one time as a hotel. Now it is a museum.



The external log walls, supports, ceiling, and a larger portion of the floor and interior walls preserved their original aspect. In the center of the building is a fireplace with heating for two adjoining rooms. All of this reflects that in the past the home was well furnished. In the six rooms of the lower floor is displayed all inventory and all of the few items of furniture which were left by the colonists at their departure; these were found later. In 1799 Emperor Paul 1st established the Russian-American Company, the aim of which was to establish a world-wide growth of the fur trade on the American continent. At first, Kodiak was settled, however, the headquarters of the Company and main trading center soon became Sitka. The northern part of the Pacific ocean coast of America, abound by the fur animals and Russian hunters for a period of many years, supplied a profitable Chinese market with furs which they brought from their advanced post in Alaska. However, the fur procurement in Alaska gradually diminished and the only new rich source of raw materials could serve (was at that time almost virgin)coast of California. At that time in Petersburg, no thought was given to establishing a permanent colony in California. The Emperor and his ministers, wholly engulfed by important European affairs, gave scant attention to a promising but unexplored region, situated at a distance of 14,500 kilometers from the Russian capitol. However, a young man was found, a nobleman by birth, Nikolai Petrovich Rezanov, who was able to appraise tremendous potential ability of the West Coast of America, when Emperor Alexander 1st in 1805 offered him to accompany an inspection trip to Sitka and Kodiak. Rezanov immediately accepted the offer giving him an opportunity to personally be acquainted with the New World. To his great distress, Rezanov found Alaskan colonists on the edge of death from hunger. Many perished from scurvy. Rezanov quickly realized that a singular source to furnish provisions could be the Spanish settlement located 3000 kilometers south, in the Bay of San Francisco. He hoped that local Spaniards would want to enter into trade relations with the Russians. In substance then, in Rezanov arose a brave plan to establish a new colony on the Pacific ocean



coast south of Alaska, otherwise Russian-America cannot exist. The Spanish already started to resettle in California where they had their Presidios and a series of Catholic missions in which Franciscan Monks were converting Indians to Christianity. They were solidly established in San Francisco and to the south of it on the coast. Upon knowledge of Russian intent to establish a colony in California, they notified Petersburg that they did not want invasion by Russians in their domain. Rezanov purchased in Sitka a four masted vessel "Juno", loaded it with merchandise and provisions and sailed to San Francisco so that he can in person get acquainted with the Spanish. To his surprise he was well met and received an invitation to dine with the son of the Commandant, Don Luis Antonio Arguello and his beautiful daughter Donna Concepcion (Conchita). The Spanish proved to be courteous hosts but obviously did not desire to enter into trade ties. Rezanov in detail described a desperate situation of the Alaskan colonists but he did not succeed in having the Commandant to condescend. In the meantime, youthful Donna Conchita proceeded to fall in love with Rezanov. The love of two young people, which started, according to Rezanov "less than turbulent", gradually strengthened and soon Rezanov offered to Conchita his hand and heart. The offer was accepted. By virtue as a future member of the family of Arguello, Rezanov received finally such indispensable provisions as were needed and departed San Francisco, promising to return as soon as he obtains the Emperor's permission to wed. (Conchita was Catholic). The unfortunate young man was not even fated to reach Petersburg. In the plains of the Eastern Siberia, his horse threw him. The Kozacks brought seriously wounded Rezanov to Krasnoyarsk where he died March 1, 1807, it being nine months after he left San Francisco. Only after several years did Donna Conchita learn of his death. She did not wish to marry anyone else and entered a convent. Conchita outlived her betrothed by 50 years. This tragic history is one of the most popular chapters of the California chronicles.



About a year after the death of Rezanov, his plan to colonize California became known to the Emperor Alexander 1st who, with his ministers, considered this. However, Alexander was too concerned with Napoleon's wars rather than think of an expedition; therefore, Baranov, then governor of the Russian-America, decided to act on his own risk and fear with the assistance of meager means available at his disposition. In February 1808, with an aim to locate a suitable place for the new settlement in California, an expedition was sent. Of the two vessels participating in it to the place designated, arrived only one; the second sank across from the mouth of the Columbia River. In charge of the expedition, a former merchant, then a collaborator of the Russian-American Co., Ivan Alexandrovich Kuskov, known all over Alaska for his explosive nature, and with a wooden leg as a result of an unfortunate occurrence arising from a hunting accident of many years ago. He was a trusted person of Baranov and his assistant. Kuskov, however was not likely to serve as a responsible leader of a dangerous expedition. Rezanov, who valued Kuskov for his energy and honesty, but an indication of his hot-headedness and lack of political knowledge, wrote about him: "I am soliciting for him a rank of Commercial Advisor, only to protect him, if not from insults then at least from being beaten, as he was repeatedly threatened." On the 8th of January 1809, Kuskov with his vessel dropped anchor in the Bay of Rumiantsev (named in honor of a well known State Figure) being 80 kilometers north of San Francisco. Here they spent eight months, succeeding in that time to tie a friendship with the Indians, build several buildings of temporary type, and obtain about 2000 pelts of the valuable otter. Voyagers found here a comfortable haven, abundance of fish and fur animals, mellow climate, rich soil, and most important a territory not occupied by any European power. Kuskov returned to Sitka satisfied that he managed to find a suitable location. In February 1811 he was again sent south. On the trip the daring navigator found an isolated cove, north of the mouth of the Slavianka (at present time - Russian River). Above the



cove at the height of 30 meters, spread out a green plateau. Around it, as far as the eye can see, was shining ultramarine ocean and noisy waves fell upon the sandy beach. To the east the plateau was closed in by the hills with huge sequoias. Kuskov was elated. From the local tribe of Pomo he purchased about 400 hectars of land for which he paid, according to information reaching us, in all three blankets, three pairs of trousers, two axes, three hoes, and several strings of beads. (Regardless how miserly was this price, it was a singular circumstance when California Indians were paid something for the land; the Spanish did not pay anything). Kuskov returned to Sitka in order to stock the provisions and obtain people for construction of the new settlement. Selection of the colonists did not present any hardship since many were glad to leave the north with its shortages and needs. Kuskov recruited 95 Russians and 80 Aleuts. In March of 1812 the heavily laden schooner "Chirikov", having on board 175 people and a fleet of 40 boats--  
anoes, arrived in California. Aleuts started to hunt the otter and energetic Russians took to the first pressing business--preparation of lumber for construction. They piled gigantic sequoia up to 60 meters and diameter of 6 meters from which they hewed posts and boards. Construction of the first buildings started. After several months, on the hill appeared a fortified settlement. On the 30th of August 1812, the name-day of the Emperor Alexander 1st, was held an official inauguration of the colony named "Ross". This was signified as a grand holiday and a feast. The Spanish in San Francisco looked upon the new neighbors with suspicion. Although the Russians did not indicate any animosity, the Spanish nevertheless were apprehensive of further penetration to the south into the Spanish colony. Prior to the inauguration of Ross, the Commandant Arguello sent an officer, accompanied by seven men, to investigate the new settlement. Upon return, after several weeks, they reported that they were cordially received and were permitted to inspect anything they desired.



The Spanish learned that Russians intended to remain in Ross, fortifying its settlement and to surround it with a stockade. At the northern and the southern corners were found embrasures for cannons. These bastions were predesignated to protect all approaches to the Fort. Later, when the cannons were placed (numbering in general 41) the Fort in fact became impregnable. The stockade has an appearance of a rectangle about 75 by 100 meters. Behind it was the home of the Commandant of the colony, officers quarters, barracks for the Russian workers, chapel, and various warehouses and services (buildings). Some of the buildings were two stories. The home of the Commandant had glass windows and was well furnished. The chapel had many icons. The first winter in California happened to be a severe one for the colonists. The Spanish did not desire to sell provisions in trade for materials and metal. It was not possible to plough and plant before the springtime and the stored provisions were almost exhausted. However, the climate was moderate; daily the dense fog spread from the ocean and people suffered from constant dampness. The winter of 1812 was also hard in many other respects. At homeland (land of birth) existed sad events. In September Napoleon had taken Moscow. In America, broke out a war between United States and England and American vessels transporting Russian freight were anchored in their own ports. The following year, the Spanish however, lifted the embargo from trade and exchange, a substantial quantity of cattle, horses, wheat, otters, dried beef, and lard, in the general sum of \$14,000. In the meantime Kuskov, with his people, did not sit idly; he managed to erect some more structures and widen the port in the Bay of Rumiantsev, which is located 45 kilometers to the South. French merchant Bernard Duhaut-Cilly, who visited the Fort Ross that year, did not find there any "disorder" or "rudeness" which he observed in the Spanish "Presidio". In lieu of that he noticed "well built roof work, attractive homes, neatly planted gardens and fenced with closely spaced boards, fields, and a totally European atmosphere." Around the Fort were crowded wooden cottages with flat roofs, lodging of Aleuts who came with the



expedition. In the immediate distance of the Fort were disposed a bakery, storage, barns and stock yards, tannery, and various work shops. Ashore, at the foot of the cliff, was built a small pier, two ramps, one for canoes and the other for construction of the new vessels and preservation of the lumber; blacksmith shop and a bath-house in which the colonists could steam bathe as if at home in the land of birth. The Spaniards continued to send scouts to Ross. Their former concern of the ties with the Russian settlement being renewed because of the immediate proximity to their colony, became an open animosity. In 1815 Kuskov received from the Spanish Commandant, a note insisting that Ross be evacuated. This was the beginning of long diplomatic correspondence between Madrid, Petersburg, San Francisco and Fort Ross. In relations with the Spanish officials, Russians continued to maintain previous courtesy. In 1817 the Russian vessel "Rurik", completing an around the world trip, entered in San Francisco "Presidio". There also from Ross was called Kuskov, evidently to discuss the question of evacuation of the Fort. However, it seems that neither they nor the other side could undertake further steps without receipt of specific instructions from their governments, for which at that time was needed months if not years. There was an interference, most likely due to the difficulty with the language, especially when an item touched fine legal questions. As a result no agreements were reached and an argument with the Spanish remained unresolved. Most foreigners who visited Fort Ross were surprised at the harmonious well organized life. "In everything was seen complete order and discipline" wrote Duo Cilly, "and everywhere was felt a guiding hand, colonists, workers and soldiers simultaneously all day were busy on various jobs but at night guarded the Fort. Holidays they spend in review and target shooting." Colonists were nourished primarily with meat of seals and sea gulls, fish, and wild fowl. Grain, vegetables and beef were usually saved for the settlers of Alaska. Ross sent vessel after vessel with California grown grain, barley, peas, beans, with beef and pork lard and



dried beef to the northern settlement and by this extracted substantial profits from the exchange trade. However, in 1822 when California crossed from Spain to Mexico, California merchandise was saddled with a new tax. In 1817 on merchandise sent by a vessel "~~K~~utuzoff" the colonists received more than 250 percent of profit, then later a profit of 35-70 percent became to be considered as decent (profit). At just that time when the flow of provisions to Alaska started to diminish, also was curtailed the trade and procurement of furs,--this motivated a search for new sources of income. Although the agriculture played an important part, its production primarily went to the needs of their own colonists. Each fertile piece of land near the Fort was planted with grain or barley; in warm and moist portions grew pumpkins, watermelons, beets, cabbage, and other vegetables. The ground was rich and fertile but among colonists almost there were not any experienced peasants capable to increase the agriculture to its due elevation. Indians declined to go on heavy agricultural jobs; when they worked they were rewarded with cheap gifts. In the meantime, the ranks of the colonists were thinning, some died, others were aging and lost the ability to perform labor. This way or another the village husbandry did not satisfy leaders of the Fort but they continued to support it with changing success. The shipbuilding business proved to be of little profit notwithstanding the rich sources of construction materials. Colonists built several vessels but all of them were seaworthy a short time since the construction material was not seasoned long enough and workers lacked necessary experience. A collaborator of Russian-American Co., Kirill Hlebnikov, complained that the single "profit" extracted from the shipbuilding was the growth of prestige in the eyes of the Indians who were greatly amazed by the skill of their neighbors. But, in what Russians actually succeeded was the hand-made ware. Not one piece of wood, iron, or leather was left unused, all was converted into merchandise for which the colonists received frequent orders from the Spanish. Russian seafarer Otto von Kotsebue who visited Ross in 1822 wrote



that "Spanish could pursue to learn the domestic economy from Administrator (of the Fort) Von Schmidt who has reached an astonishing success. Under his guidance, here are manufactured cannons and instruments not conceding to the best which are now in Europe". In 1823 the Spanish completed creating a chain of missions along the coast, building the last two north of San Francisco - in San Rafael and Sonoma. In the opinion of Otto von Kotsebue, these Spanish wanted to interfere in the growth of Russian interests in the area of San Francisco Bay. "It is a pity that we did not get there before them"--wrote the seafarer; "the advantage which is given by the ownership of this excellent Bay is immeasurable". An Englishman, Frederick Beachey, who visited the Fort Ross, spoke of Russian colonists, "Their new settlement in Ross is so close to the border that it cannot but evoke Spanish feeling of envy, not without a foundation for as much as I know, the settlement is well fortified and serves all California as an example that fertility can bring here adaption and toil". The Spanish mission in Sonoma is located only 65 kilometers from Ross. When it was inaugurated, Russians sent a gift to the new church, several ornaments, and Monks often turned to the colonists for assistance when in need of some sort of repairs or instruments. It was not an open antagonism between Spanish and Russian colonists. However, Spanish administration, although interested in mutual benefits of trade, has shown constantly a diplomatic pressure on its neighbors, contesting in principal their right to colonize the border. By 1830 the settlement of Ross has reached about 400 persons but then in all of California were living only 4250 people. The vessels of the Russian-American Co. continued once or twice a year to come from Sitka and entered in San Francisco for grain. It was the Command of Ross who already did not believe in success. Prospect of economy was becoming worse and losses reached 30,000 roubles a year. In 1838 the last Administrator was appointed to Fort Ross--Alexander Gavrilovitch Rotchev. He was not only an exceptional Administrator but as well a highly cultured person who composed



poems and translated into Russian, works of Shakespeare, Schiller, and Victor Hugo. His wife, a beautiful blonde, Elena Pavlovna was born Princess Gagarina and was reputed as one of the bright women then in California. Other officers also brought their wives and the dismal atmosphere which hung in the final years over the colony, started to disperse. Balls and receptions were arranged, where the ladies endeavored to outdo each other in their attire. Elena Pavlovna had built a greenhouse and brought a piano to the Fort--almost the first in California. During these years the Spanish hidalgo even started to come to the Fort with social visits. In 1841 during the nameday of Elena Pavlovna, appeared at Ross a cavalcade of 30 Spanish riders. They galloped from Sonoma to the Fort which took the whole day and later danced 'til the morning. Mexican governor Vallejo was enchanted by the charming hostess and wrote of her as "a beauty, barely entering the 20th spring and possessing, besides other talents, an irresistible charm". Vallejo states that Elena Pavlovna even conquered the heart of the stern Indian chief, Solano, who intended to kidnap her during one of the trips by the Rotchevs to Sonoma. In the fruit orchard of the Fort was built a summer house and when the Rotchevs dined in the arbour, a Russian flag was unfurled. A (conceited) French Count, Eugene Dufeo de Mofra, noted that in all California he felt himself comfortable only in the Rotchevs home, where, at the disposition of the guests was a "finely selected library, French wines, anda piano and the music of Mozart". But anyway the happy times were coming to an end. By 1837 the expenses to maintain the colony amounted to 72,000 roubles a year, but at that time the income barely reached 8,000. To save the Fort expectations now were less. The new governor of the Russian-American Co., Baron Ferdinand Wrangel, calculated that preservation of the colony would have merit only if Mexico would allow to enlarge the land holdings. Wrangel made an effort to refer with the request to the Mexican government, but received a denial because his request was not supported by the Tsar's Court. It was then decided to



begin the liquidation of the useless and expensive colony. In April of 1839 the decision was confirmed by the Emperor Nicola I. Fort Ross was designated to be sold. At first Rotchev offered it to the Mexican governor Vallejo. A huge amount of varied inventory of tools, 1700 head of horned stock, 940 horses and 900 sheep, were appraised for only \$30,000. Vallejo agreed to purchase only the stock for \$9,000. Mexicans stated that a foreign company had no right to sell buildings constructed on the Mexican soil from local materials and demanded that Russians yield all constructions free. They were certain that another purchaser cannot be found. To their surprise, a buyer was found. He proved to be an American of German-Swiss ancestry, Johann August Sutter, who became famous later during California gold rush fever. Sutter obtained buildings, furniture, and all stock for \$30,000 on time payments. The land was not offered for sale and later was used as pasture by the American farmers. Canadian Hudson Bay Co. has taken upon itself the problem of securing provisions for Sitka,--since this formality was tied to the evacuation of Ross. In 1842, after 30 years of living on the American continent, the last small group of settlers sailed north. Could Russians possibly remain in California on a legal basis if they wanted to? Many years ago an eminent California historian, Hubert H. Bancroft, subjected this question to a thorough study; "Russians, said he, "never did pretend on sovereignty of the occupied by them region or some other part of California territory--their aim was to establish an advance post to hunt fur animals and for trade. They endeavored to obtain California's favor and establish trade relations. They avoided deliberation of their rights and underlined the common interests of the Company and California, trying peacefully to smooth all differences. Strongest possible right to claim of the Company on the already by then occupied section (which, however, did not have any strength, either under Spanish or Mexican laws), could be based on that fact that the land was in private ownership, based on purchase of it



from the local occupants and its Company ownership for thirty years without interruption, but in 1841 this claim could not be counted as substantial since the land itself did not, or almost did not, have any value and the California government could hinder the sale. The Company purposely excluded the cost of the land upon completion of the transaction with Sutter, and Sutter himself never counted that he obtained any section. Considering all of these circumstances, it is possible to confirm that the Russians had a good title to the land; but there was no purchase deed since such generally did not exist". Sutter moved most of the buildings to Sacramento and from all of the original settlement today in Fort Ross are left two buildings. In 1906 all of the section was obtained by the San Francisco office of the California Committee to save historical monuments and converted to a museum. Most important, however, what is left from the past is this fact:--one of the greatest events in the American History, appropriation of the West was started by a small detachment of manly Russians. Only sixty years later, after the Russians stepped on California land in the area of the Fort Ross arrived the American pioneers, establishing the basis of that settlement which exists today.

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