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Title: Fort Ross Since 1841, excerpted from The Russian Advance Into California

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THE RUSSIAN ADVANCE INTO CALIFORNIA

by

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1922

FORT ROSS SINCE 1841

Disposition of Sutter's Purchase

Fort Ross ceased to exist as a Russian settlement in 1841. Yet a few Russians were left in the vicinity to care for the property until Sutter should take possession of it. Sutter first sent a man by the name of Roberts to look after his property at Fort Ross. Early in 1842, John Bidwell took his place and was succeeded, the following year, by William Benitz. The purchase of the movable property from the Russians by Sutter included a schooner, the "Constantine", which was renamed the "Sacramento". By means of this vessel all the desirable property was conveyed to New Helvetia, or Sacramento. Even some of the newer houses were torn down and shipped, although most of the buildings were left intact at Ross. The cattle were driven overland to their new home. One four-pound brass cannon sold to Sutter by the Russians was taken to Sacramento. This is said to have been used to salute the first hoisting of the American flag at Sutter's Fort on July 12, 1846. Later, Sutter gave the cannon to the Society of California Pioneers and it is said to be on exhibit in their Museum.¹

Although the movable property was thus duly disposed of, there came to be a question as to the ownership of the land that the Russians had occupied. The certificate of transfer given to Sutter by Rotchef has been mentioned in Chapter 5. This came to be called "Sutter's Deed" and was the cause of much trouble among the settlers in the region and in the law courts until 1860. The sale of the movable property was registered by the Russians and Sutter, with the Mexican Government in San Francisco, but Sutter's Deed was a separate document given personally to Sutter by Rotchef. This designated that all of the land lying between Cape Mendocino and Cape Drake was given over by Rotchef into the "Indisputable possession" of Sutter based "upon the institution and spirit of the laws sanctified by Spain and Mexico." This was a large claim and it was but natural that the holder of such would have difficulties in trying to maintain his rights. Moreover, additional complications came into the case when in 1845, the Mexican Government granted to Manuel Torres four leagues of land called the "Muniz Rancho." This extended along the coast from Stillwater Cove about four miles above Fort Ross to the mouth of the Russian River. Inland the boundary ran parallel to the coast to Duncan's Mills and thence followed the Russian River to the ocean. The Muniz Rancho,

which therefore included Ross and was the center of the holdings of the Russians, was in this manner legally given over to Torres. Torres chose to sell his grant to William Benitz. Meanwhile, Sutter had sold his "deed" to an American, who was dividing up the land and selling it to others. William Muldrow and others were involved and the matter was taken into the courts. To avoid a tedious and involved law-suit and to secure an undisputed title to his land, Benitz offered \$6,000 for the Sutter, or Russian title. This was accepted and the matter was settled in Benitz' favor.²

Benitz is said to have sold the grant to Mr. Dixon and Lord Fairfax, who held it for some six or eight years, selling it in 1873 to G. W. Call,³ who took possession in the spring of 1874.⁴ Mrs. Call and her children now own about 3800 acres of the original grant of the Mexican Government.

A Glimpse of the Intervening Years

Mr. Benitz seemed to have been a good manager. He was tactful in dealing with the Indians and is said to have had as many as 500 natives working for him at one time. The bell, which now hangs on the porch of the commandant's house was bought by Benitz and used to call the Indians. It was Benitz who built the two-story addition of five rooms on the south of the commandant's house. The two together served both as a residence and as a hotel until very recent years. The rooms were large, especially the south room upstairs.

West of the stockade are the remnants of the flower garden planted by Mrs. Fairfax. Some roses and lilies are still struggling to brighten the general condition of the ruins near them. In front of the addition is another garden which is thriving in spite of its lack of care. However, most of the trees and flowers about Ross were planted by Mrs. Call.

The place kept up its communication with the outside world by means of boats. From 1866 to 1877 one schooner and sometimes two were making regular trips to Ross. Later, about 50 schooners called each year to carry away wood, fence posts, tan bark and dairy products. After the railroad was extended to Cazadero, which is about 13 miles from Fort Ross, a stage was run regularly bringing mail and passengers. At present this does not go down to Fort Ross but stops at seaview on the ridge 1450 feet above the old Russian Settlement.

Seaview takes its name from the magnificent view of the ocean to be seen between the gap in the forest-covered hills on either side. It was formerly known as

Henry's Hotel. Mr. O'Brien took over the hotel for a time, but 18 years ago the present owners, Mr. and Mrs. Morris Enos bought it. Fewer people than formerly visit the place and as help is scarce, no effort is made to encourage people to come to Seaview.

Changes Made by the Calls

Naturally, many changes have been made since the Russians departed. Many of these have been made by Mr. and Mrs. Call. For example, the road to Fort Ross was opened up by Mr. Call, who personally subscribed \$1000.⁵ Now, the roads in the vicinity are all county roads. It was Mr. Call who succeeded in having a post office established at Fort Ross. The old Russian well, which was of no practical value to the Calls, was filled up. On the hill west of the stockade, Mr. Call planted a double row of cypress trees very close together to serve as a windbreak against the northwest winds of summer. The trees are large now and serve the purpose admirably. The Calls built their own home at the base of this small hill. Some years later their son erected his close by. Across the road stands the schoolhouse, which was built over 30 years ago, and which is still used for the half dozen children of the neighborhood.

As shipping was important during the Russian occupation, so for a long time Mr. Call made much use of this industry. Shipping was aided by the erection of two combined workshops and warehouses on the west side of the Rocky Beach. The warehouse farther south was built on the edge of the cliff and the other down near the water. Hence, it was necessary to build a sort of pier to make the loading and unloading of ships easier and safer; this took the nature of a narrow inclined chute, about 180 feet long, to which a swinging apron 100 feet in length was attached. In the warehouse above the lumber chute a steam engine drew the iron cables as they were used in the process of loading and unloading.

At one time some men who visited the place thought that a profitable lumber trade could be carried on, if a means could be devised to get the logs down from the hills more rapidly. They returned to San Francisco and bought up quantities of old cable, when many of the cable cars in that city were being replaced by electric. This was shipped to Ross and now lies rusting at the base of the cliff near the outer warehouse, as the scheme proved most impracticable.

Another way in which Mr. Call improved his property was to enlarge the Russian orchard and plant several kinds of pears and apples. With a minimum amount of care these have thrived and now produce well. Near the orchard is a good spring

from which water is piped to the Call residence. Several dairies have been developed and 2000 acres have been fenced. Although the Russians had about 1000 acres under cultivation, only 100 acres are tilled at present, 1700 acres being used for grazing, and 2000 acres being still in timber.

The Earthquake of 1906

Fort Ross was unfortunate in being in the line of the rift of the great earthquake which shook California in April of 1906. On the hillside back of Ross a fissure several yards deep was made and the lower side of this sunk several feet. The rains have since washed in the earth, so that one would not suspect the cause of the broken soil. Farther down the hill, below the timber, the earth was thrown up in a series of small mounds and the crude picket fence surrounding the field was broken. At Ross there was a decided loss in the destruction of the old Russian chapel. The walls crushed like paper, but the roof settled down on the ruins quite intact as if seeking to dignify the destruction it would fain hide.⁶ None of the other buildings were affected.

The "Greenwood" Disaster

The serenity of life at Fort Ross was broken again on March 17, 1908, when the "Greenwood" was wrecked off the coast. The passengers and crew found a good friend in Mrs. Call, who gave them food and shelter for several days. The "Pomona" came to the rescue of the ship in distress⁷ and all were adequately cared for in due time.

The Site of Fort Ross Purchased by the State of California: Chapel Rebuilt

As Mr. Call was always anxious to preserve what he could of the old Russian buildings and their relics, he made repairs from time to time. The commandant's house was preserved by putting on a new roof and weatherboarding the great redwood beams. When the great earthquake shattered the chapel, it seemed too bad to let this landmark of the Russian occupation, which had weathered so many years be lost to the public. Mr. Call appealed to the State authorities to take over the site of the Fort and rebuild the chapel, because of its historical associations. In due time this was done; 2 1/2 acres, which included all of the stockade, were bought from Mr. Call. The plans for the building were furnished by the State Engineer, who put them in charge of Mr. Carlos Call. The work was done between 1915-7 by Mr. Edwards, a contractor of Santa Rosa. In rebuilding the chapel boards were taken from the partition of the second-story in the Benitz Addition.

By studying the pictures of the chapel in 1895, 1906 and 1920 respectively, several facts are brought to our attention. The original chapel had three windows on the south; the restored building has four. The original had no window in the dome; the restored one has a small round one on the south. The original was much more crude in its construction than the reconstructed one. Between 1895 and 1906 a number of repairs were made. In 1895 there is no cross surmounting the hexagonal belfry; in 1906 one is plainly seen. Moreover, the roof has been repaired at the base of the belfry and dome. There is no record that the Russian buildings were over-painted, but the restored chapel has benefited by several meager coats.⁸

Besides planning for the restoration of the chapel, it was provided that the south fort should be restored, since this deteriorated before the north bastion. This was to be built on a concrete foundation, which was made octagonal to correspond with the original. But, up to October, 1920, no superstructure had been raised on the foundation, for the War with Germany stopped building operations, and the matter has not been pushed since.

The Condition of the Cemetery

The cemetery across the gulch to the east of the stockade was not included in the land purchased by the State for preservation. The large wooden cross which called attention to the last resting place of many Russians has fallen down. A dozen or more graves are marked by large slabs of redwood, lying flat on the ground. Many of these are nearly gone, having been attacked by insects and the storms of a hundred years. Kuskof, the first commandant, was probably buried in this cemetery, as he died here in 1820; but there is no mark of any kind left to distinguish which of the Russians are buried in this neglected cemetery.

Rainfall

The rainfall in this region is greater than that of most places in California. Between 50 and 90 inches of rain usually falls annually, although the winter of 1919-1920 brought only about 20 inches. Mr. Call's record for the first three months of 1899 shows over 37 inches. The rainfall at Seaview is greater than that of Ross. This good rainfall and the frequent fogs greatly aid the growth of the redwoods and other forest trees, as well as supplying better pasture for herds than is to be found in many parts of the State.

Present Occupations and Population

Dairying is now the chief occupation at Ross. One dairy is located northwest of Fort Ross, while another is southeast. The dairy products are sent by truck to the railroad at Cazadero. Apples raised on ranches north of Ross are shipped in the same way. The tan bark of the oak trees in the region has been exhausted and there is no demand for the wood that could be shipped from Ross. No ship calls regularly at the place. Only one ship was expected in 1920, and that was for a load of redwood railroad ties which had been cut and were being hauled and piled back of the lumber chute during September and October.

About 1890 there were at least 50 people living at Fort Ross, but in 1920 there were only 9 there, 6 more at the nearest dairy and 8 at the ranch 2 miles to the southeast. Not a person in the neighborhood, as far as cursory inquiry revealed, claims to be of Russian descent. Instead, the residents are thrifty Americans of foreign extraction, including Swiss, Scandinavian and Chilean blood.

Relics of Fort Ross

In order to preserve relics which would be of historic interest, Mrs. Call has sent quite a varied collection to the Memorial Museum in Golden Gate Park, San Francisco.⁹ Among the articles sent is the carved candlestick which was used in the chapel by the Russians. Another is one of the large millstones used to grind grain; its mate lies broken at Fort Ross. The hand-made nails, a bullet-mould, and huge hinges speak of the difficulties encountered in pioneer life. Mortars, pestles, arrow-heads and coins also form a part of the exhibit. The Russian bricks are unusually large,¹⁰ but like the planks and beams used in their buildings, they vary greatly in size.

The Impressions of a Recent Visitor

The general promiscuity of the range of hills lying north of the Russian River is astonishing to the traveler who goes by railroad and stage toward Fort Ross. These hills seem to trend in no general direction but to be almost individual in shape, size and position. All are wooded, but they are not suitable for agriculture nor cattle-raising to any great extent. Thus the Russians were hemmed in by conditions that nature had imposed upon their selection of a settlement.

Besides the trees mentioned by the Russians, the madrona also grows in the neighborhood of Seaview. While it has no timber value, yet with its large, dark green, glossy

leaves, it adds much to the beauty of the ridge. In the canyons and on the north side of the hills, brakes, sword ferns and maidenhair ferns grow luxuriantly. Beautiful wild roses allure one into the cool depths of the forest. Among the great redwoods on the road leading down to Fort Ross, this seductive influence is pronounced. In places this road is very steep, since in three miles there is a drop of 1500 feet in elevation. At one particularly trying place some one has taken the trouble to nail a crudely painted sign to a large redwood to encourage those who undertake to make the trip by car. It reads--

"Ford's Rest.

Cheer up.

6/10 mi. to the top.

If gas is low,

Back up hill."

The first glimpse of Fort Ross is obtained when one emerges from the forest about 600 feet above the sea.¹¹ Looking south from this point, the tableland about Ross is to be seen spread out at your feet with the beautiful blue Pacific stretching out to the misty horizon in the distance. On a bright October morning the scene is wonderfully beautiful and fascinating. To the west one looks out over the rolling foothills, which show signs of having been under cultivation at one time.

Closer at hand and several hundred yards below on the hillside is the orchard. The road goes by the orchard but in watching the unfolding of the landscape below, one is apt to pass on and not notice it. Added to this the orchard is inconspicuous as it presents a hoary appearance. The corner of the orchard nearest the road is that of the original Russian planting. Here the apple, pear and cherry trees have apparently been unpruned for some years and their strength has been absorbed in sending out a tangle of branches from which hang masses of grayish-green moss. About these is a portion of the original fence built by the Russians. It is likewise overgrown by moss until one does not suspect at the first glance that this place once supplied delicious fruit to those who tilled the fields below. The tiny knarled fruit that grows on several of these trees is either almost tasteless or else bitter. Only 15 trees have weathered the hundred years since they were planted. But in the midst and spreading over the hillside are trees of more recent planting which bear luscious pears and apples.

At the foot of the hill the road leads almost due south and down through the middle

of the old stockade. One is almost disappointed in Fort Ross. The old north bastion reminds one of the Russian occupation more than all else perhaps and this is in a dilapidated condition.¹¹ One feels as though the original landmarks would soon be gone and little would remain to witness to the bravery of the sturdy northerners except the name itself--Fort Ross. The reconstruction of the chapel and the purchase of the land show that some interest has been taken in this historical place. Perhaps, more will be aroused in time and more people will know of this chapter in California's history.

Footnotes

¹Thompson, The Russian Settlement, 14-5; Overland Monthly, XXII. (July, 1893) 127;1-cf.

²Etholine, Copy of Alex. Rotcheff's Deed (Russ. Am., V); Bancroft, Cal., IV, 185.

³G. W. Call was born in Ohio in 1829. He showed the pioneer spirit in moving from state to state. He reached California in 1852 and after visits to various parts of the Pacific coast, he sailed to South America in 1859. After visiting all of the chief ports and the interior of Peru, Bolivia, Chile and Argentine, he settled down in business in 1865 in Valparaiso, Chile, where soon after he married Miss Mercedes Leiva of that country. He returned to San Francisco in 1872 and the following year bought the place, which is now held by his family. Mr. Call died some 12 years ago. His picture is shown on p. 176 of History of Sonoma County by Munro-Fraser. Ibid., 625-6.

⁴Many of the facts given in this chapter will be information gained verbally from Mrs. Call or from personal observation from October 2-3, 1920, when I visited Fort Ross.

⁵I understand that this sum was later refunded to Mr. Call.

⁶See accompanying photo taken after the earthquake.

⁷Photo shows the "Pomona" on the land side of the "Greenwood" in the Ross "Harbor".

⁸Entering the chapel, one finds it to consist of two rooms, an outer hall, 8 by 24 feet, and the chapel proper, 21 by 24 feet, with the ceiling only 7 1/2 feet from the floor except under the circular dome. The dome, which is in the center of the room, is 16 1/2 feet in diameter. In the east end of the chapel there is a neatly made altar on the edge of the small platform, which is raised six inches above the floor. None of the former furnishings remain, and as there are no seats of any kind, the room seems small and barren.

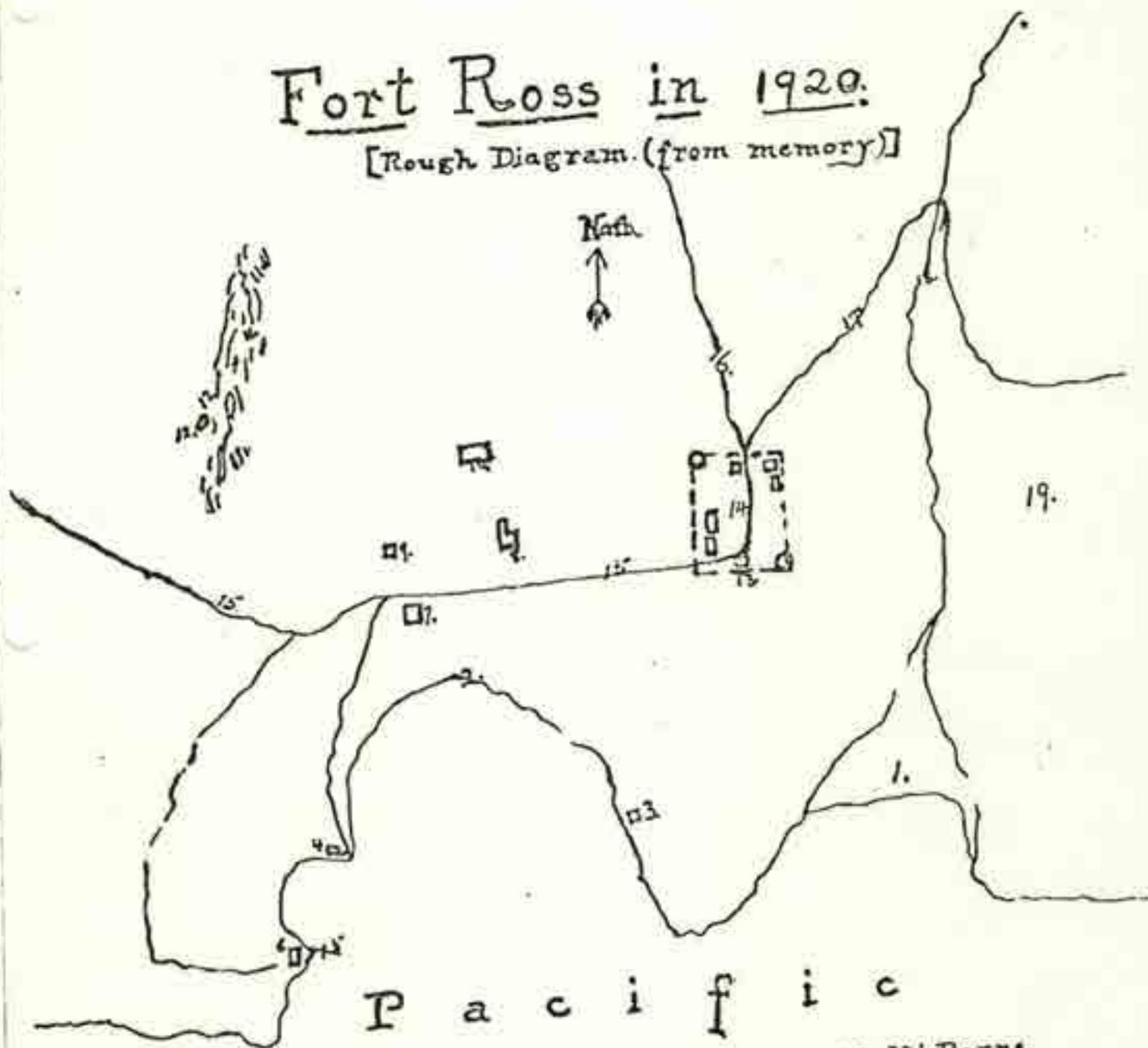
⁹ These were not on exhibit in November of 1920, but the curator promised to give them a place as soon as the new room for the Pioneer Exhibit is added.

¹⁰ One brick picked up in the old orchard measured $10 \frac{1}{2}$ by 6 by $2 \frac{1}{4}$ inches.

¹¹ See accompanying photos.

Fort Ross in 1920.

[Rough Diagram. (from memory)]



- 1. Sandy Beach
- 2. Rocky
- 3. Staging Used in Unloading Ships
- 4. Warehouse for Shipping
- 5. Lumber Chute
- 6. Outer Warehouse for Engine Used in Shipping
- 7. Schoolhouse
- 8. Mrs. G.W. Call's Residence
- 9. " " " " Son's " "

- 10. Mrs. G.W. Call's Barn
- 11. Cypress Windbreak
- 12. Location of Russian Windmill
- 13. Fort Ross Post Office
- 14. " " " " Quarters, etc.
- 15. Road to Timber Cove
- 16. " " " " Seaview and Casadero
- 17. " " " " Boadega Bay
- 18. Russian Gulch or Ravine. [In poor condition]
- 19. " " " " Cemetery