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RECOGNIZING INDIAN FOLK HISTORY AS REAL HISTORY: A FORT ROSS EXAMPLE

by

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ABSTRACT

Too often do we find Native American folk history patronized as "legend" or some form of "just-so" stories without basis in fact, when in reality they often form valid oral history, simply told from a different viewpoint and background. Two such stories from the Kashaya Pomo living near Fort Ross are compared with Russian and English historical accounts to give us a remarkable picture of a Hudson's Bay expedition in California in 1833.

Thanks to the diligent work of linguist Robert Oswalt in recording the stories of the Kashaya Pomo (1964), we have two fascinating accounts of a mysterious expedition passing by Fort Ross. The first one, entitled "The Ayash Expedition" (No. 54) was told by Essie Parrish to Oswalt in 1958. She had heard it from her father. The second, "The Big Expedition" (No. 57) was told by Herman James in September 1958. He had learned his stories from his maternal grandmother, Lukaria, who "had lived her entire life in the vicinity of M'etini and was about eight years old when Fort Ross was founded there" (Oswalt 1964: 9). A wonderful thing about these writings is that they are presented in dual language, with the Kashaya and English side-by-side.

In his introduction to the stories (which are properly included under "Folk History") Oswalt suggests an element of ambiguity about the timing of the event since Essie Parrish states that it occurred "long, long ago before the white men arrived" (Oswalt 1964: 247), whereas James says that it was at a time when "the undersea people had landed there" (1964: 251). This term, "Undersea People" has been interpreted to mean the Russians, however, I contend that it actually referred to the Aleuts, Creoles, Tana'ina Indians and other native peoples the Russians brought with them who made up 80-90 percent of the Fort

Ross settlement (Cf. Fedorova 1975: 12). This is important in understanding the difference between the references to "undersea people" versus "white people" as shown in the story "Tales of Fort Ross" (Oswalt 1964: 277), in which the term "white people" refers to the post-Russian period, American settlers such as William Benitz. Thus, for Essie Parrish to say "before the white men came," really means before the Americans came (i.e., prior to 1842). Thus, the apparent ambiguity is fairly easily resolved.

It is worthwhile to recount each story in full to give the full flavor of the descriptions. The first, by Essie Parrish (Oswalt 1964: 246-249):

The Ayásh Expedition

1. I am going to tell about something that happened in the old days--something my father used to tell. It was over at Métini, long, long ago before the white men arrived.
2. The Indians didn't know what could be coming over. They were suddenly coming over where the ridge slopes down at Métini. It was at daybreak, when the sun was just rising, that they started to come over.
3. Some were riding on mules. Their possessions had been tied on. [Some] were packing their babies in baby baskets; others had tied [their babies] on the animals. Both the men and women all wore long clothes. And on their heads something like cloth was wrapped around and around. They were tall men, tall women. They came down the mountain endlessly.
4. Then they turned north. The Indians watched them going. Even when they turned it was as if they were coming down in an endless series--like the waves of the ocean. They turned, they went way off to the north, after a long time they were past. After they had finished passing by, there was a cloud of dust kicked up along the trail they had come down--because there were so many of them, I suppose.
5. There was one Indian who had gone off casting for fish at a gravel beach just at the time when those people were coming down. And it turned out that they caught that man. Having caught him, they took him along. After they had turned north that man didn't return--he was [discovered] to be lost. [The Indians] searched far and wide for him at the beach where he had said he was going. He wasn't anywhere; they thought he had been carried off by the ocean. Unexpectedly, on the next day towards evening, he returned.

6. Then he told about how some people had captured him--those who had turned to go along the ocean. He said that after having caught him, they led him away. They stopped to take a rest--probably at some place far to the north. Having stopped, some of them detached their baby baskets from the animals. Having detached them, they drilled a fire on the babies [baskets?]-on them they drilled. They then let the fire blaze up. I don't quite remember if they did it to warm themselves or to cook--but [the captured man] said that they ate their food raw.

7. I also don't remember how he happened to escape from them. Having run off he crawled into his home--somehow they didn't chase after him. When he arrived home, he collapsed sick. From some cause, perhaps from being so scared, that happened. That man kept on getting sicker and sicker. No one being able to cure him, he died in his home.

8. That is the end of what I heard of the story.

9. I forgot to say this. When they came over, there, they were talking, talking a lot. But they [the Indians] couldn't understand them, they were speaking another language. The only word they detected was /ʔayá-š/. While saying other things, they were saying /ʔayá-š/. Consequently they were named Ayásh, but I don't know what kind of people they were.

Next we have the account retold by Herman James (Oswalt 1964: 250-253):

The Big Expedition

1. In the old days people lived at Métini. They say that at that time the undersea people had landed there. They lived there together close by, having become acquainted with each other.

2. Then one time when they looked across [a canyon] there was something like a cloud of dust flowing along. Unexpectedly there were people coming--many. They had horses and everything--even their children were suspended on the horses, and food too. They were dragging along long poles fastened to the horses. Then in places such as where creeks flowed down, they made what are called 'bridges' and went across on them.

3. At first [the natives] thought they were few. Then when they came down the near face of the mountain [they saw that] there were many people with horses, dragging the poles along. They kept coming and coming. Now they approached where [the natives] lived. "They are apparently people of some kind," [the natives] were saying. Having become frightened, they went into the houses. With no one in plain sight, they watched [the expedition] while thinking that [the strangers] would kill them. Even the undersea people did the same--they had never seen anything like that before; nor had the Indians.

4. They came down like that--all in a row they came down--many--many hundreds--thousands. They were going along as if they would never come to an end. When they came close to where the undersea people were living, a few people straggled out and gave them some of what they [Indians and Russians] had to eat. They gave flour, being afraid. [The strangers] took it willingly--at that time. They gave it to a lot of them.

5. They went on and on--they are said to have been coming down for about half a day, as if the column would never cease. [The Indians] watched while they were coming down with everything, quivers and bows strapped across their chests. They kept going like that, like I described. Those things that they were dragging along they laid across the gulches and went across. They went on and on like that. Finally, after a long time, the column came to an end.

6. In two places guards were standing; one boss was at the head and another at the rear, wearing different clothes. The one in front was the leader. The rear one was a guard. For a long time they didn't finish filing by. For nearly a day they went by.

7. After that, after three or four days had passed, [some Indians] having gone northwards saw what they had given all poured out on the ground--it looked terrible. They hadn't known what it all 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, as [the Indians] found it. When those people who had gone there returned, they told that the food they had given was all dumped. "Apparently they didn't eat that kind of food," they said. "They probably didn't know it was something to eat."

8. After the people had filed by like that, they didn't know what kind of people they were--neither the Indians nor the undersea people recognized them. They told about it and kept saying, "I wonder what they were."

9. It remained that way for a long time. No one ever knew. It still remained the same. After a while they wanted to find out. When they did so, the [Russians] said, "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 Indians of those people. "I wonder where they belong and where they come from." But they hadn't asked when they came through where they had come from or what people they were. They had just watched frightened--they only asked too late when no one knew.

10. It stayed that way. This that my grandmother told me, she also saw herself. She said that when they came by she was terribly frightened. The undersea people were afraid too, and gave them food even though they didn't ask for it. This is also true what happened there. This is the end.

E.W. Gifford (1967: 5) also mentions that in a discussion with Herman James in 1950:

Herman spoke of strange men with horses and tents who came to Fort Ross while the Russians were there. They had with them women and children and dogs. The Russians gave them flour and other things and they left for the north. They kidnapped one Southwestern Pomo woman, who came back a year later, but soon died. This was in Herman's grandmother's time before his mother, Marie James, was born. These people came from inland, Herman said; they were Indians, not white.

The inconsistencies between what Herman James is reported to have said to Gifford and the story related to Oswalt show up the superior quality of having such information provided in the native language and in a coherent statement. It is evident that Gifford has confused two stories told by James, because James has another story which he calls "Ayásh" which seems to deal with some totally different description of a supernatural people living in the vicinity of Fort Ross who capture a woman, who eventually escapes after a long time (Oswalt 1964: 174-177). There is also confusion in Gifford's account of stating that it was the Russians who gave the flour to the strangers, rather than the Aleuts.

EXPLANATION

Who could these people have been? A large number of tall men and tall women, with children brought along, riding mules and horses; dressed in long clothes with their heads wrapped in cloths; speaking a strange language that neither the Indians nor the undersea people could understand. They pulled poles along behind their horses and mules. They did not stop at Fort Ross, but continued on north some distance. They took the flour offered them by the Indians and Aleuts, but later threw it out. They made blazing fires but seemed to eat their food raw. When the Russians were asked who they were, they said they were "your kind of people." So who were these people?

The answer seems to me clear. They were members of a large fur hunting brigade, almost certainly a Hudson's Bay party. Such a group, the so-called Bonaventura Brigade (Bonaventura being the name they gave to the Sacramento River) passed by Fort Ross on April 19, 1833. It was led by two of the Hudson's Bay Company's most experienced expedition leaders: John Work and Michel Laframboise. Work kept a journal of the expedition and the entries for

the 18th to the 21st of April, 1833 tell us part of the paltry historic record which remains to us of this event:

Thursday 18 [April, 1833] Stormy cold weather. Raised camp and proceeded over a succession of hills 15 miles Westerly to the sea shore and along the shore to the Russian river, which we crossed immediately, and encamped. Here we met the governor of the Russian establishment [actually Manager Peter Kostromitinov] he objected to our passing his establishment and said there was no road except right past the fort we told him that we meant [?] to pass but that we meant to pass it at a distance, he was told that our two nations were at peace and that we did not see any reasons for his objections and that we must pass. he then said that as there was no other way he would allow us to pass [words obliterated] to accompany him [words obliterated] it was after dark when we arrived. I took two men with me and left Michelle [Michel Laframboise] to come on with the camp in the morning. The governor speaks but a few words of French, so that we had not much conversation, he treated me very politely.

Friday 19 Raw cold weather. The camp passed the fort past noon & proceeded 5 miles farther on, where we encamped, the governor and a number of his people accompanied us to the encampment, he invited me to dinner with him at the fort in the evening. I returned to the camp in the evening. he had been along the 100 miles on discovering the road we are going, he represents the road as passable but intrrenched by a great number of deep gullies which are difficult to pass. There are also some points of woods.

Saturday 20 Heavy rain all day. The bad weather deterred us from raising camp. This is against us as there is not much grass for the horses.

Sunday 21 Thick fog all day. Raised camp and proceeded along the shore 18 miles W.N.W. had to cross a number of deep gullies which greatly retarded our progress. The road lies along the shore here the shore is rugged [?] and rocky and the hills which approach [?] close to the shore are in several places [?] wooded with pine & other trees that [?] I do not know. There is a narrow...along the shore with little wood...in spots here are the...(Work 1944: 23-24).

From the Russians we also have a brief mention of the passing. Dmitry Zavalishin speaks of a report by the Governor of the Russian colonies, Ferdinand Von Wrangell, dated April 28, 1834. It is said to have described "a party of 163 men with their wives and children, and with 400 horses" (Zavalishin 1866: 14-15). Thanks to Professor James Gibson, I have obtained a copy of the Von Wrangell report to which Zavalishin refers (National Archives n.d.). Ms. Tanya DeMarsh has kindly translated the pertinent portions of the

text which actually states that there were approximately 450 horses [and mules] in the party along with the previously mentioned 163 men.

These details bear out a statement in Work's notes, dated January 22, 1833, wherein he states there were 46 men, 34 women, 60 children and 23 Indians in the party. Very likely, Work reported this figure to Kostromitinov in asking permission to pass. These figures give us a vision of the dramatic effect that such a large group would have had on a small village of Kashaya Pomo. It is easy to imagine the Brigade strung out for perhaps a mile, coming down the hill above Fort Ross and passing silently upcoast to the north where they would encamp some five miles further on. Looking at a map, this would have placed their camp somewhere in the area between Stillwater Cove and Ocean Cove on the coast.

Von Wrangell actually visited the fort in person in July of 1833, only a little over two months after this occurrence. In a description of how the Indian laborers were provided for, he says that they were "allotted only flour for gruel as food" (Gibson 1969: 211). This may have been the flour which they gave to the passing Hudson's Bay people, who, in turn, threw it out. No doubt they were not used to eating flour as gruel and had no facility on the march to use it to bake bread.

Virtually everything mentioned in the Kashaya accounts is comprehensible and remarkably accurate given the totally alien nature of the group they were describing. Realizing that a Hudson's Bay party of the time was made up mainly of French-Canadian trappers, many of whom were part-Indian themselves, along with their wives who were all half or full-blood Indians (John Work's wife was a Nez Percé [O'Meara 1968: 205] while Laframboise in 1839 had his union with a French/Okanagan woman named Emily Picard blessed by an insistent priest [Nunis

1968: 165]). The outfits worn by these people would have been the long clothes, with what would appear to be cloth wrappings around the head. Such buckskin apparel was certainly common to the Plains and northwest peoples, as well as the French-Canadians.

Many other tribes were represented and it is almost a certainty that the lingua franca being spoken would have been the Chinook Jargon named for the people who formerly occupied the mouth of the Columbia River (Thomas 1935:69). This "language" formed the main unifying trade language for many of the peoples of the Pacific Northwest. In trying to determine a possible meaning and source for the word /ʔaya-š/, I consulted several Chinook Jargon dictionaries (Cf. Anonymous 1899; Anonymous 1931; Gibbs 1863; Thomas 1935) and believe that the word is the one rendered as /hyas/ or /hy-as'/ meaning "big, great, very." This would fit well with Essie Parrish's statement, "The only word they detected was /ʔaya-š/. While they were saying other things, they were saying /ʔaya-š/" (Oswalt 1964: 249). Why this word would have stood out among all the others, I do not know.

Being able to pinpoint the dates of the event and the further information from John Work that the weather was exceedingly cold, we also can understand the creation of a big blazing fire, for warmth rather than cooking, mentioned in Essie Parrish's account. The fact that they are described as coming down the Fort Ross Russian road and then heading straight north is understandable given the grudging agreement between Work and Kostromitinov (Archives n.d.; Work 1944) that they should simply pass on by without lingering at the fort.

The reference to the strangers using the back of their babies' baskets as a platform for using a fire drill is interesting. I would have thought they would have used a flint and steel to start their fires, but evidently this was

not the case. The comment that despite the fire "they ate their food raw" would seem to refer to their preference for jerked meat, a good travelling food which they did not have to cook.

The fact that the captured Indian who subsequently made his way back to his house, but later fell sick and died, is very interesting in light of Work's comments on the number of sick people in his party, especially those suffering from malaria. The Indian people of Fort Ross were thus very fortunate that the party was not encouraged to stay near Ross and interact with the Kashaya resident at Métini. The dreadful disease may have spread to many more people.

In Herman James' account we have the additional mention of what sounds like a travois being used behind the horses. This too would fit well with the Hudson's Bay party. The fact that the two leaders of the expedition were described as wearing different garb is clear when one thinks about the differences in background of the sober-sided, expedition leader, Irishman John Work versus the flamboyant dress of the French-Canadian trappers, one of whom may well have been acting as rear guard.

CONCLUSION

The two "stories" by Essie Parrish and Herman James prove to be the remarkable recordation in oral history of a very specific event which is capable of being precisely dated by reference to the English and Russian statements. But it is the Kashaya accounts which give the real meat to the story of the disturbing and incredible intrusion of the outside world onto their people. The fact that the "undersea people" reacted similarly indicates how removed from the council of the tiny ruling authority of white European

Russians was the populace of Fort Ross.

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