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THE HISTORY OF  
FORT ROSS

by  
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Professor Seely  
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Russia's wild "promyshleniki"<sup>1</sup> began moving eastward toward Alaska as early as 1547 in search of fur bearing animals. They crossed at an expansion rate of sixty miles per year. Furs were in demand not only because they were an easily marketable commodity in Europe and China, but also because they were used quite often in place of money. At that time an average pelt had the value of a fifty acre farm. By 1639, the fur hunters reached the Pacific ocean leaving behind a trail of wilderness forts that later developed into towns and villages. As furs got scarce in Siberia, the Promyshleniki pushed on to Alaska in crudely woven boats made of lashed planks called "shitiki"<sup>2</sup>. By 1720, they began hunting on the Kuril Islands.

Officially, the Russian government expressed no interest in North America until 1724 when Peter the Great chose Vitus Bering, a Dane in the Czarist Navy, to explore the possibility of an Asian-American land bridge. In 1727, Bering explored the sea along the eastern coast of Siberia and concluded that no such bridge existed, but many scientists were dissatisfied with his findings. Bering was again sent out in 1741 to settle the question once and for all. On this expedition, he discovered the Aleutian Islands and sea otters. The Russian Promyshleniki were not far behind, and within twenty-two years were deeply rooted all over the Alaskan coastline.

At about the same time, Spanish explorers in Lower California came across otters in 1730 while looking for pearls. They sent a few pelts to the King and Queen in Spain as tribute, but they did not realize the commercial value of the otter until much later.

As word leaked out to the other nations about Russia's expansion and the fur business, France, Britain, and the United



States sent out explorers and traders of their own. Alarmed and threatened as well, the Spanish quickly began establishing their Mission system in California, and claimed California on the basis of Perez's voyage in 1774. Much earlier, in 1542, Spain sent Juan Cabrillo in search of Anian's Strait (The Northwest Passage). He went as far north as Fort Ross, but he never landed or came ashore. Although Sir Francis Drake visited and claimed the California coast for England in 1579, calling it New Abion, California remained unoccupied and little explored for about 200 years.

Interest in exploration was low until Britain sent out James Cook and France sent La Perouse. Boston shippers learned about otters from deserters from Cook's command.<sup>3</sup> Between 1784 and 1800, Spain developed a sea otter trade with China for the mercury it needed for extracting Mexican gold from ore. In the first four years, Spain made a profit of over \$2,580,000.00. In attempts to monopolize the pelt market, Spain closed her ports to all foreigners. The Americans ignored the ban and started trading with the California ranchers and padres illegally.

Back in Alaska, the first permanent colony was established in 1785 by the Shelikov-Galikov Company. The fur merchant, Shelikov, was soon rewarded with special hunting rights by the Russian government. Under the direction of the government (General I. Yakobi of Irkutsk and Kolyvarsk) representatives were sent out starting in 1787 to bury iron tablets and distribute copper tokens among the natives in newly explored lands. The tablets, marked with an image of a cross, were labeled "Land under Russian domain", and were buried in all appropriate locations so that "not only are the native inhabitants not to see them, but they are also to be hidden from everyone of the



Russian workers as well, so that, by keeping this secret, the inhabitants may be prevented from guessing that the tablets were placed there at the present time". At the same time, the Russian coat of arms on the tokens were "to indicate to those of other nations who might come hither that these lands and their inhabitants already belong to Russia". Shelikov diligently carried this out, but later, when some of the tablets were uncovered, he was ordered to remove a number of them. This general marker practice was continued for quite some time.<sup>4</sup>

The first Russian vessel built of American lumber was launched in 1794 and called the Phoenix. As other promyshleniki saw the advantages of group efforts to counteract foreigners, and receive government help, many companies were formed, each hoping to become the biggest and most powerful. In 1799, the Russian American Company was established as a monopoly and was granted Imperial protection through Shelikov's son-in-law, Nikolai Rezanov, who, at that time, was serving the Czar as Chamberlain Privy Councilor and functionary of the Senate. All the other fur companies were absorbed or abolished.

The Russian American Company was given permission to use crown timber to build ships, to navigate local waters, to barter with foreign countries, to exploit mineral rights, and to build fortifications and settlements with the help of crown lead and gunpowder from Siberian factories. In addition, the company was also chartered to govern the land in its domains in return for extending Russia's possessions, and securing a prominent position in the Pacific ocean (as a precaution against foreign competition).<sup>5</sup>



That same year, Alexander Baranov was appointed the first governor of Russian America, and in 1802, Nicholai Rezanov was appointed as the emissary between the Czar and the Russian American Company, when his wife died.

For the most part, Alaska prospered, but occasionally it did have problems with either the Tingleet or Kolosh Indians who were supplied regularly with rum and rifles by American traders. An even bigger problem was a diminishing supply of otters. Thanks to an agreement signed in 1802, Russia and Spain maintained a peaceful relationship. Elsewhere, the United States, having just concluded the Louisiana Purchase, sent out the Lewis and Clark expedition which claimed the Oregon territory at the mouth of the Columbia river. In 1803, while selling supplies to the Russians, a Bostonian named Joseph O'Cain established the Yankee-Russian Contract System with Baranov; leaving 12,000 roubles worth of merchandise as a pledge of good faith.<sup>6</sup> Not having otter hunting skills, bartering for furs for the Americans was much too risky to be profitable. The Russians, not having adequate transportation, seized the opportunity to form a partnership, hoping also to observe sites for future settlements. All costs and profits were split 50-50. The Americans provided the ships to transport the Russians to other otter areas, while the Russians provided the Aleutian Indian hunters and Russian supervisors. The plan was a big success.

. In 1805, when Rezanov came to check up on the capitol of New Archangel, he found most of the colony dying of starvation due to inconsistent food shipments from Siberia caused by shipwrecks, delays, etc. Temporary relief was obtained from the ship Juno, but



when its supplies were exhausted in early 1806, Rezanov was forced to set out for San Francisco to trade with the Spanish. He was allowed to land, but not to buy anything other than as much grain that the Juno could hold besides its own cargo. To complicate matters, the ship's crew began to mutiny. As things got grimmer, it took less and less time for Rezanov to fall in love with Conception De Arguello (the Presidio Commandant's daughter) out of diplomatic necessity. Once betrothed, pressure was put on the Spanish Governor for permission to work a plan to circumvent the law. It was finally agreed that cash was to be the medium for purchases on both sides. The Russian goods were bought for money, and the Presidio commissary exchanged the goods for the grain, so that the Russians at last could purchase the food they needed. This move saved Alaska and enthused Rezanov about the establishment of permanent trade relations. Before going back to St. Petersburg to clear up the legalities of his future marriage, Rezanov infected Baranov with his ideas of establishing a permanent trade base in California to supply the north with food. The plan involved a scheme of using Chinese for laborers.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, while going through Siberia Rezanov died at Krasnoyarsk in 1807. Conception De Arguello became California's first native born Catholic nun after taking the veil of a Dominican sister at the age of sixty in 1851.

When Czar Alexander the First bought company stocks in early 1806, the Russian American Company received another privilege: suggested by Count Nikolai Rumiantsev, Minister of Trade, the company would have its own flag. Composed of the National Coat of Arms on the background of the Czarist National flag, the Russian American



Company was authorized to fly its colors on its ships, islands and settlements until late 1882.<sup>8</sup> Another development was more attention given to the contract system: old contracts were renewed, and new ones were begun. Russians, Aleuts, Bidarkas (Kayaks), as well as a few native women with staple provisions of whale meat and whale oil were dropped off at key points by American captains to establish a line of sea otter hunting bases removed from Spanish population centers. A few such bases were: The Cerros Islands, The Santa Barbara Channel Island, the Todos Santos Islands, etc. The Aleut hunters were often called "Marine Cossacks" for their skill with the Kayak.<sup>9</sup> They rowed their Bidarkas with ease at 10 miles per hour. Otters were hunted by circling a group of them, and shooting arrows or darts attached to wooden shafts connected by lines of whale sinew, until the otters were either exhausted and caught, or until they escaped.

The American captains would come up with all sorts of tricks to outwit the Spanish in attempting to hunt for otter on the California coast. One famous trick was the one about the dead sea captain's wife (a last resort when all else failed): arriving in port the captain would often ask permission to bury his dead, non-existent wife at a Mission. He would then hire all the soldiers he could from up and down the coast to join in a procession and fiesta in honor of his departed loved one. All in all, the activities took up about three weeks during which time the Aleuts would be left free to hunt otter without Spanish interference.<sup>10</sup> Until the Russians began hunting otters independently, the Aleuts paid the penalties for search and seizure (imprisonment or death), for poaching as well as



for spying.

By 1807, Bodega Bay was becoming an international hideout by all the non-Spanish for traders and hunters. That same year, when quarrels developed as a result of some of the Russian gambling, their furs away to the American sailors, even more pressure was put on Baranov to establish a new settlement. Two ships finally left New Archangel in 1808. One was shipwrecked near the mouth of the Columbia river. Most of the crew was captured and enslaved by the Quillayute Indians. 13 out of the 20 captured survived.<sup>11</sup> The other ship, the Kodiak, having touched off at Trinidad Bay looking for otters but finding none, went on to Bodega Bay, about 50 miles north of San Francisco in 1809.

Kuskov obtained rights for a settlement from a local Olamentko Indian chief named Valenila, who requested a Russian Flag in return as a sign of alliance.<sup>12</sup> A proclamation was sent to Spain but it was not received until 1812. Markers were then deposited in the usual fashion. Temporary buildings were built at the base of the lagoon inlet which is now called Campbell Cove. Exploration was the officially announced purpose of the Russians, but they spent most of their time hunting otter. According to Spanish records, there were 40 Russians, 130 Aleutian men and 20 Aleutian women at Bodega. 2,351 pelts were caught in eight months and were either sold to American traders or exchanged for rum, sugar, cloth or Chinese cotton stuff.

It wasn't long before the Aleutians began to hunt under the very noses of the Spanish, hauling their Kayaks over to San Francisco bay from the south end of Tomales Bay. Some of them were captured and the Spanish government got revenge by guarding their water



supply in the San Francisco area. At this point it was decided that a more permanent base was needed. Kuskov went back to Alaska to make his report.

Bodega was described as unoccupied; with sheltered anchorages, fertile land, much water, friendly local Indians, and much otter. Baranov renamed the area after Count Nikolas Rumianstev, who devoted many years to the company working within the government back in St. Petersburg, and later financing several scientific expeditions in California.

Between 1810 and 1812, the Spanish were in dire need of industrial goods. Baranov devoted most of his energy in building ships for trade with the Philippine Islands and California. He sent Kuskov back to Bodega in 1811 to further develop the area. Holdings were extended to Freestone, Salmon Creek and Jenner for the food needs of Alaska. Cattle were raised for dairy products on the ranches and potatoes and other vegetables were raised on farms. Stock was raised and the horses used for traveling were pastured there. The main warehouses were located on the lee side of Bodega head. They stored grain, wine barrels, hide and navigational equipment. Fresh water was supplied through a system of conduits from a spring on Bodega head.<sup>13</sup> A smithy brickworks, and a large grindstone was established there also. Another industry was rope making. At port, there was a large bath house, several boats (including a 20 foot launch) and a few houses. Most visitors were met there before being taken to Fort Ross. DuHaut Cilly, upon seeing the settlement, wrote that: "well made roofs, houses of elegant form, fields well sown and surrounded with palisades, lent to this place a wholly European air".<sup>14</sup>

Bodega also had its disadvantages. The harbor could not



receive ships that drew more than 9 feet of water. The shore of the bay was too muddy or sandy for easy access without a pier, but the closest forests were too far away, and few carts were available. Also, too many Russian worker exiles were escaping to San Francisco, and Spain was much too near for comfort.

In 1811, Kuskov left New Archangel again to find a more secure site for the headquarters of the Russian Colony in California. He was the first Russian to explore the California interior, and went fifty miles up the Russian River giving it the name of "Slavianka" (charming little one). The Russians reportedly discovered Humboldt Bay, Arcata Bay and went 70 miles up the Sacramento River where they probably found Lassen Peak, traveling as far as Clear Lake.<sup>15</sup> That same year, the Columbia region was permanently abandoned by the Russians as a possible base after John Jacob Aster founded the American fur Company. Of all the land surveyed, Kuskov liked the Fort Ross area best because of its soil, timber, and water supply. Another deciding factor was that, lacking a good harbor, it would be more difficult for any potential enemies to capture it.

Although geologically not far from the San Andreas fault, the area of Fort Ross offered a wide variety of wildlife which included deer, foxes, racoons, skunks, jack rabbits, pocket gophers, bears, bobcats, wolves, mountain goats, and bison, as well as otters, sea lions and harbor seals. Native trees included redwood, Douglas fir, tan oaks, bay laurel, and nutmeg.<sup>16</sup> Arriving in the "Cherikov" at Bodega Bay in January 1812, Kuskov soon left to distribute metals and gifts among the Kashia Pomo Indians. The local Indian settlement was (called "Mad-zhy-ny" by the Russians) i.e. The Village of Meteni,



along with 1,000 acres was finally purchased from chief Chu-gu-an for a bag of beads (made in Italy), several pairs of pants, 2 axes, and 3 blankets. However scant the price may seem, compared to the Spanish, who paid nothing, this was the first instance on record of any payment made to California Indians for their land.

From the very beginning, the Kashia welcomed the Russians as a buffer against Spanish rule. The Pomo were so pleased with the bargain that they even helped the 95 Russians and 80 Aleuts build a redwood fort.<sup>17</sup> When the Spanish heard the news, they didn't take it sitting down. Moraga and 7 men were quickly dispatched to investigate. Kuskov explained his presence and attempted to get privileges of trade. While Moraga was reporting back to Arguello, the governor in Monterey, Kuskov dedicated the village (August 13, 1812).

The fort walls enclosed an area 280 feet by 312 feet. The stockade was constructed as follows:

"A trench was dug two feet deep, while every ten feet along the bottom of the trench a hole was dug one foot deep. In these holes posts about six inches by ten inches were inserted, and between the posts and the trenches there was a strong girder firmly mortised into the posts, and fastened with a strong wooden pin. The posts were about thirteen feet long, twelve feet above the trench girders, and therefore, ten feet above ground when trench was filled.

Slabs of varying width, but all about 6 inches thick, were then used to form the stockade wall. These slabs were firmly fastened to the girders down in the trench. Twelve feet from the trench girder, was run another girder which also was mortised into the posts and made fast with pins. This topping girder rested on the tops of the slabs, which were slotted on top, and huge wooden pins run through the timbers to make them fast.

The main posts extended about three feet higher than the top girders, and near their tops a lighter girder was run all round the stockade. Between these two top girders was a solid redwood wall of lighter slabs, two inches thick and four inches wide, and pointed like pickets."<sup>18</sup>



It was almost invulnerable. In the northwest corner was a 7 sided log 2 story blockhouse, and in the opposite corner was an 8 sided log 2 story blockhouse. Each contained port holes for cannons. The blockhouses were built with many sides to better withstand any possible stresses and strains of flying cannon balls. In addition, they were built at opposite ends to catch the enemy in a cross fire if ever besieged. Within the stockade was a commandants house, a barracks for soldiers, a belltower, officers quarters, a kitchen, 2 or 3 two story warehouses, and several other miscellaneous buildings that served an array of purposes over the years. Although a well was located inside, it was only used in emergencies. Water for everyday use was furnished by an outside well and a nearby creek.

From the start, the fort was called "Ross", an old form of the word "Rossia" (Russia). Usually it was referred to as Slaviansk or Slaviano - Ross. Later the outpost was called "Selenie Ross" or "Kolonias Ross" i.e. Ross settlement or Ross Colony.<sup>19</sup> The first winter was very rough and bleak because the Spanish refused to trade, and the earth could not be tilled until spring. Back in Russia, Napoleon was occupying Moscow. At the same time, the Americans were at war with Britain. This meant that no goods would arrive from Russia for a while. Nor could Russian cargoes be easily bartered as long as American ships were detained in their own home ports. Luckily, a small food station was started on the Farralone Islands that same year. At most, 30 Russians and Kodiak Indians with their wives were sent there to collect sea lion meat, sea gull meat and eggs, as well as to hunt for furs. They lived in stone houses or shelters and water was delivered on a regular basis from other areas.



The animals were not only eaten, but sea lion bladders were used for water sacks and blubber was used as oil for lamps and cooking.<sup>20</sup>

In early 1813, Moraga re-visited Fort Ross and informed Kuskov of a trading plan. He also presented the fort with its first horses and cattle. Governor Arrillega conceded to an exchange of commodities as long as the Viceroy's decree of not letting foreign ships enter Spanish ports was upheld. Although the practice was illegal, goods were bartered boat to boat. \$14,000.00 worth of goods were exchanged (due to California's urgent needs because of Spain being at war in Europe). Slabodchikof was sent to San Francisco as an agent for the Russian American Company.<sup>21</sup>

When Mexico's Viceroy became worried about the Anglo-American advance on California, he ordered a surveillance on the Russians. When suspicion was aroused about the still continuing Yankee-Russian contract system, Kuskov was told to abandon the fort and Bodega as a violation of the 1802 treaty. Kuskov responded, saying that no competent interpreter was available, but did send a summary of the trouble to Baranov. Kuskov also focused his attention on completing and expanding the fort grounds.

By 1814, the first peach tree was planted and over 50 buildings were built outside the fort. They consisted of the Aleut "Yurts", a windmill to grind grain, a tannery workshop, a stamping machine for grinding tan bark, farm buildings, granaries, cattle yards, a bakery, threshing stable, sheep pens, dairy houses, hog pens, corrals, and 10 kitchens. On the beach there were 10 storage sheds, 8 bathhouses, boathouses, a copper shop, a blacksmith shop, a pier, a boat landing and bidarka racks.



Spain's concern about Fort Ross grew into open hostility when Pablo Sola took over as governor in 1815. As trade competition grew, matters turned far the worse. The Americans began working against the Russians and vice versa.<sup>22</sup> To keep the peace, the Russian American Company tried to keep its California affairs as quiet as possible back in St. Petersburg and Madrid. Everytime Kuskov received letters condemning Russian activities or Spanish order to leave, he resorted to sending all the documents to Russia for translation and then back again for consultation ~~once~~ he read them. This process took approximately 2 years. When Sola lost his temper and sent all the soldiers he could spare to rid the Russians by force, Kuskov calmly invited them to take their choice of being wine and dined before being sent on their way or being blown to smithereens, then and there. Seeing that the stockade was impregnable, and that they were outnumbered, they quickly chose the former. After that, Sola went back to eviction through diplomacy but retaliated by arresting as many Russian agents and Aleutian hunters as possible in Monterey. This disrupted otter hunting and trade to such an extent that it almost came to a complete standstill. Realizing the political and natural limitations of independent otter hunting, Russian officials began investigating the possibility of setting up a Spanish-Russian contract system. They also strove harder to comply with Spanish laws in keeping with their past, generally honest record, in hopes of easing the plight of the Aleutian and Russian prisoners.

The situation generally stayed deadlocked until Otto Von Kotzebue, leading a scientific expedition, arrived on the ship "Rurik" in San Francisco in 1816.<sup>23</sup> Kotzebue and his crew were



well received. Other than for science, the "Rurik" had a mission to explore parts of the South Sea, and to locate a Northwest passage into the Arctic Sea. The two scientists on board were entomologist Johann Friedrich Eschscholtz and naturalist and poet Adelberto Von Chamisso. While Kotzebue kept busy with diplomatic conferences, Chamisso, and Eschscholtz were busy observing California wildlife. In Chamisso's diary, we find that the California poppy was named by him after his friend Eschscholtz.<sup>24</sup> Back at San Francisco, Sola, Kotzebue and Kuskov were discussing the situation. Sola asked Kotzebue to order Kuskov to leave California. Kotzebue said he didn't have the power to do so. Whenever sensitive matters were discussed (such as otter poaching), each side said that it was unable to act without precise instructions from their governments, or that the language was unclear. Little was accomplished other than deciding to forward the matter to the attention of the ruler of each country. While the papers were being signed, the Aleuts<sup>25</sup> were hunting otter in San Francisco bay. This whole dispute with Spain was never resolved. When the Czar received word about the Russian American company in California, he ordered an official report to cover up the fact that he sanctioned the project, when it was begun. The only good event was with the outbreak of the Mexican revolution, all the classes in California were product hungry, so contraband flourished again.<sup>25</sup>

The most significant industries that were developed at Fort Ross while the otter hunting was bad were stockraising and shipbuilding. The animals included cattle, horses, oxen, mules, sheep, pigs, goats, geese, and chickens. Most of the livestock was consumed at the fort except for beef, which was saved only for big occasions (entertain-



ment of visitors), or was shipped to Alaska along with tallow, hide, wool and butter. Dairy cows produced milk and the horses, mules, and oxen were utilized for transportation, ploughing and threshing grain. Although the animals were well taken care of, few Russian Aleut~~an~~ or Indian workers~~ss~~ could be spared for the huge task of herding, so for the most part the livestock had to fend for themselves in the open, living on a diet of field grass, wild plants, roots and shrubs. Despite distant grazing lands and too few sheds and enclosures, stock raising was quite successful except for the pigs, who thrived on fish guts and abalone. Their meat was so distasteful that they were soon turned loose in the hills, and are believed to be the ancestors of the wild Russian boars of west Sonoma county.<sup>26</sup> Shipbuilding, for the most part, was a failure. None of the ships lasted over six years on the high seas due to improper seasoning of the wood in the construction process. In a 7 year span, 4 ships were built in addition to longboats, skiffs, rowboats and kayaks. In time, the shipbuilding was re-channeled into logging and lumber production.<sup>27</sup>

By 1817, Yakov Podushkin obtained the successful release of the remaining prisoners in Monterey. Back at the fort, the settlement was completed except for the chapel which was built later. To bolster Russia's claims to California, Captain . A. Hagemeister was sent to Fort Ross to draw up an official document signed by several local Pomo chiefs as a formal proclamation of the 1812 unwritten trade and treaty of cession of the land. The chiefs also certified that they were pleased "with the occupation of the place by the Russians", who made it possible for them to "live in security from other Indians" who used to attack them.<sup>28</sup>



The average population of the Fort at any one time varied from 200 people to 400 people. The Russians were mainly male officers, chiefs of hunting parties, mechanics or convicts. The Aleutians were hunters, fishermen and skilled laborers, while the Pomo were the unskilled paid laborers. All the men doubled as farmers and soldiers were needed.<sup>29</sup>

The only women ever at the fort were either visiting noble-women, wives of the commandants or officers, or were Aleut or Pomowomen from Alaska and California. The first grapes planted in Sonoma County were planted in the Coleman (Kolmen) Valley. All agriculture was on a small scale, solely to provide for the essential needs of the colony. Much of the daily food eaten was fish and other seafood as well as game from the nearby forests. Rabbits were hunted by lighting fires and killing them as they escaped the flames.

In 1818, Hagemeister replaced Baranov as governor and appointed Semyon Ivanovich Yanovskii temporarily to take his place when he went to San Francisco, to improve business relations with the Spanish. Trade was desperately needed because the usual trade with Peru was cut in half due to unrest in South America. California was more lax in attitude towards foreigners and it was the best time to convince them to trade. In addition, Hagemeister took the opportunity to proposition Sola about a possible otter hunting contract with no luck, but he did manage to get the trade policy changed (to legally trade for supplies). There is much speculation that Russia would have been willing to abandon Fort Ross at this point in exchange for a permanent Russian-Spanish otter contract relationship.<sup>30</sup> When all failed, Yanovskii tried to change Sola's mind on the matter by sending him gifts. Sola did not waver, however.



It was finally decided to let the courts in Europe work things out. Although now more friendly, the Spanish still kept an eye on the Russians by expanding their mission system to San Rafael.

In 1820, 15 fruit trees were planted at the Ross colony; 2 types of apples, pear and cherry trees and the Russian American Company in Alaska was in effect taken over by the Czarist Navy. Regardless of the diplomatic uncertainty of the Fort, it continued to flourish. A new warehouse was built at Russian Gulch, just a few miles north of Jenner. Kuskov was to Fort Ross what Baranov was to Alaska. He was called "pie de palo" by the Spanish because of his wooden leg, Kuskov was also well known for his energy, honesty, and his hot temper. Rezanov once said, "I ask for him the rank of collegiate assessor to protect him if not from insult, at least from beatings with which he has often been threatened."<sup>31</sup> He maintained order with the men at the fort, peace with the Indians, and avoided direct confrontation with the Spanish. All the buildings built under Kuskov are a monument to his executive ability, and his military exactness. The handiwork was so good that it was impossible to insert a pen-knife between the undecayed logs. A competent navigator, frontiersman, and administrator, Kuskov was regarded by the Indians as a "great chief" (api-Khoibo). His wife, Ekaterina Koskova, learned the local Indian language, acting as an interpreter, and also taught the Indian children Russian and other subjects.<sup>32</sup>

In 1821, Karl Von Schmidt took over as new commandant of the fort. Under his direction, agriculture was extended to provide enough surplus to be able to export excesses to Alaska. Wheat was the principle grain raised, although Maize, flax, hemp, tobacco, mustard, poppyseeds, rye and buckwheat from Russia were grown also.



In addition, smaller plots and vegetable gardens yielded potatoes, watermelons, pumpkins, peppers, green onions, garlic, tomatoes, and a few cabbages. Later quince trees were added to the orchard on the hill. Due to problems of a rugged terrain, constant sea fog, rodents, blackbirds, gophers, land shortages, and a lack of a mobile threshing machine, Fort Ross never fulfilled its expectation of becoming the Russian "breadbasket" in California. For the first time, much less emphasis was placed on hunting, and although the average diet improved agriculture was not successful financially.<sup>33</sup>

In 1822, California was placed under Mexican rule. A fanatical fear of an American take-over in Alaska led Czar Alexander I to sign an imperial order banning all foreign ships from North Pacific waters. This meant that trade was also suspended, and helped lead to the formulation of the Monroe Doctrine in 1823. That same year, Mexico built its last mission in California in Sonoma, as a last attempt to check Russian expansion. It is not surprising that no open antagonism ever occurred between the settlement because of the interest in mutual trade benefits due to bad economic pressures. Finally other contracts were made by Russia and Mexico permitting the Russian American Company to hunt and trade otter for 4 months between San Francisco and San Diego, splitting the pelts and costs 50-50. From that time on, the contracts were renewed on a yearly basis.<sup>34</sup>

In 1824, as rivalry between England and Russia increased, the United States and Great Britain signed a treaty limiting Russian expansion by fixing Alaska's south boundary at 54° 40' north latitude. At the same time the Canadian and Oregon border question was also settled. Back at Fort Ross, more land was explored by Dimitri



Zavalishin, who went to Sonoma, Santa Cruz, and Mariposa, Sacramento, and the Calaveras valleys. An early Mexican map suggests that the Russians went even further east. The American river was designated as Rio Ojotska after the Russian word for hunter (okhotnik)<sup>35</sup>

Under Schmidt's direction, the fort further developed some of its minor industries such as lumbering, tanning, barrel-making, wood production, pottery, brickmaking, flour milling and soap and candle manufacturing. The Russians sold redwood and douglas fir planks made with the first whip saw north of the Golden Gate.<sup>36</sup> Navigational equipment was made from hardwood bay trees and barrels from redwood. Another product was pre-fabricated houses that needed no nails. They were exported in sections, but didn't sell very well due to too small a demand. Tar came from fir trees, & pines, while tannic acid came from oak bark. The tannery located at the mouth of the creek used the tannic acid for tanning the famous "Yuft" leather as well as for tanning other leather that was made into shoes and boots. Six large vats and other equipment was located at the tannery. Sheep's wool was cleaned, carded, and spun and woven into thick clothing or blankets. The local Indians were paid in blankets for agriculture, but no matter how many wages they were offered, few Indian women desired to learn to spin wool. Hats were made and also stuffed pelts were used in place of feather bed mattresses. Pottery was made from local clay into tiles, plates, pots, cups, jugs and bricks. Flour at the mill was either baked in kitchens, stored, or exported to Alaska. Soap was made from oak wood ashes, shell lime water and animal fats. Candles were made from cattle and sheep tallow. The Russians also had a great reputation for their iron work, tool



making and repairwork. Compared to the inferior tools of the Spanish in California, the Russians manufactured farming implements as good or better than those found in Europe at the time.<sup>37</sup> They also had the only blacksmith in California. He was in constant demand from all over to repair and manufacture implements.

Combs, lanterns, and powder horns were made from sheep and oxen horns. Bell casting was also a perfected Russian art. Several bells for California Missions were given as gifts to the Spanish from the Russians.<sup>38</sup> By the end of 1824, a chapel at Fort Ross was completed. It was the first Russian Orthodox Church structure south of Alaska, but it never officially dedicated and no altar was ever built because the fort had no resident priest. When Father Ivan Venlaminov visited the fort 10 years later, he was puzzled as to what exactly happened to the enormous sums of money donated to build a church when he only found a small 2 room semi-bare chapel. It was located in the Northeast corner of the fort with a bell near the door on the north wall. Two of its sides were connected to the stockade. Few nails were used except in the roof and none of its walls paralleled or were at equal right angles. The commandant's house was built in a similar fashion, except that none of its sides touched the stockade walls.<sup>39</sup>

In 1825, Paul Shelikov took over as commandant of Fort Ross. Although a relatively good supply of otters existed in Mexican California, the Russian government got very little profit due to complications arising from using the Americans as middlemen. In the next several years, Kyril Khlebrikov kept trying to license Mexican citizens to hunt the otters, but had no luck. Up until the Mexican-



Russian contract system was changed, few otters were caught and the Russians spent much time collecting salt.<sup>40</sup> Although the Mexican government was a little afraid of the Russians, they did admit that the Russians always conducted themselves "with the greatest delicacy and honesty", while the Americans hunted without even bothering to get a license.

In 1828, Peter Kostromitinov took over as governor of the fort. During his stay, Russia was still trying to negotiate a commercial treaty. All attempts were failing. The same year, a Frenchman on a world tour, Auguste Bernard DuLaut - Cilly, visited the fort for a short time and described both the fort and the Russian River. He seemed most impressed with the order and discipline of all the officers and men, ". . . though the director is the only chief who is an officer, everywhere is notice the effects of minute care. The colonists at once workmen and soldiers often being busied all day with the labors of their various occupations mount guard during the night. Holidays they pass in reviews and in gun and rifle practice".<sup>41</sup>

In 1830, the Mexican government formed a new policy that otter hunting was closed to foreigners and Lieutenant Manuel Victoria, the elected governor, strongly enforced this law. A little while later, the Mexican citizens petitioned to allow the re-hiring of Aleuts to hunt otters, but this lasted only one year. When Baron Wrangel became governor of Russian Americans in 1830, he urged the Russians in California to extend the company's holdings south of San Francisco bay and to Sacramento in the east. In 1832, California governor Figueroa ordered settlements to be built to keep an eye on



Russian activities. The next year General Alferes Vallejo, commandant of the Sonoma Frontier, was sent to Fort Ross with a good will letter proposing trade relations in exchange for Czarist recognition of the Mexican Republic. He also purchased some guns.<sup>42</sup> Soon after Vallejo's visit, before inspecting the fort, Governor Wrangle hired Hartnell as an agent in San Francisco to obtain cargo of produce to secure concessions on duty payments. At Fort Ross, the Baron found, to his dismay, the soil very impoverished with wild oats choking the grain. Because of Wrangel's inspection, two new ranches were established between Bodega and the Russian River. In hopes of purchasing better land inland, an expedition was sent out to explore the Santa Rosa plain for settlement, and Wrangel himself conducted the first extensive anthropological study of the Indians of the area.<sup>43</sup> He went as far as Mexico City for negotiations, but failed because he only had the power to negotiate a treaty. (Also because Czar Nicholas the I back in Russia refused to recognize Mexico's independence from Spain). Back in Russia, it was decided to abandon the fort as soon as a purchaser could be found. The fort was first offered to the Hudson Bay Company, but they declined out of fear of diplomatic complications.

In 1836, Alexander Rotchev replaced Kostromitinoff as fort commander, while Kostromitinoff replaced Hartnell as company agent. Kostromitinoff did succeed in getting permission to erect a warehouse in San Francisco, but the privilege was revoked before any action was taken.<sup>44</sup> Rotchev's wife, Princess Helena completely changed the fort's somber atmosphere in its last days by throwing parties and dances. Even the Mexicans began to pay social visits to the fort.

Helena was also famous for her rose garden.<sup>45</sup> Her husband



was noted as a linguist, for his university education, and for being a marvelous host. During his last years, a new commandant's house was built which could boast of California's first piano, a fine library, and imported French wines. According to recent studies by George V. Shkurkin, Department of Anthropology at California State University in Hayward, Rotchev was also noted for his skills at sharp deals. Originally assigned as a clerk and translator, he took over as manager when the official commandant Agominist Yegor Tchurnich decided to devote all of his time to studying and developing the agricultural potential of Fort Ross, Bodega and its neighboring ranches.<sup>46</sup>

In 1837, a man named Slocum visited the fort and in 1839 a man named Laplace visited the fort. Both published descriptions of what they saw. In 1840, the American ship "Lausanne" commanded by Captain Josiah Spaulding came down from Columbia to Bodega, believing it was a free port. He thought it a good place to trade without paying dues, and ignored the Russian's wishes of honoring Spanish law. While Rotchev was in Monterey, four passengers went to Vallejo to get passports. This startled Vallejo to such an extent that he sent a guard of soldiers to go to Bodega which he thought abandoned, to either re-embark all passengers and treat them as smugglers. Captain Spaulding was called upon to pay the proper dues but refused to do so unless the proper authorities declared the land lawfully theirs. While the argument was in progress, Rotchev arrived and was so furious that he raised the Russian flag over Bodega, and defied Vallejo's men to tear it down. Vallejo responded that all the Russians had to be licensed to travel between Fort Ross and Bodega. Meanwhile, the Lausanne quickly sailed away with the Russians, hiding all stranded



passengers. Much angry correspondence followed, but nothing was ever done about it.<sup>47</sup>

Soon after, Vallejo wrote the Mexican minister of war about the incident, saying that because of it the Russians were planning to leave. He urged a government plan to take over the fort after the Russians left. Back at the fort, Rotchev was busy searching for a buyer. He eventually tried Vallejo, but Vallejo refused in hopes of gaining it after it was abandoned. In 1841, while collecting Asiatic and American seashore life, a naturalist Ilya Voznesensky came to Fort Ross and was the first to climb Mt. St. Helena with Yegor Tchurnich. They left a plate on the mountain and both also explored the surrounding region, mapping four tributaries to the Russian River calling them, Olkhovka, Tturnich, Voznesensky and Rotchev.<sup>48</sup> Later that year some Russians and Kodiak Indians went to San Nicholas Islands, off the coast of Los Angeles to build a warehouse but were all killed by natives. At about the sametime the post on the Farellones was abandoned.

Finally in December the Fort Ross improvements (not the land) were sold to John Sutter for \$30,000 to be paid in four installments. He was to pay \$5,000.00 the first and second year in produce and \$10,000.00 in cash the third and fourth years. As a guarantee, Sutter's property at New Helvetia (Sacramento) was to be occupied along with the Bodega and ranch settlements until the deal was closed.

Early in 1842, most of the Russians, Aleuts and Pomo Indian wives left for Alaska. Sutter shipped most of the moveable property to Sacramento including all the buildings outside the fort. Robert Sento was left in charge as overseer.

After Sento, John Bidwell took over followed by William Benitz.<sup>1</sup> Later Sutter managed to get away without paying the full



price agreed upon by cleverly writing up a new contract dating it slightly earlier than the original. After paying the Russians, he hired one of his trusted employees to steal the money back. All this was part of this big scheme to become king of California. We only know of this because of one Frenchman's diary, who's neighbor was killed by mistake in his place. Sutter planned to slowly send out "baptized" Indians to kill all the ranchers up and down California and then steal their lands.<sup>49</sup>

Fortunately, the Mexican government stepped in and took matters into their own hands. Fort Ross was taken away from Sutter and was given to Manuel Torres as a Mexican land grant. In 1843, Benitz bought the grant and built quite a thriving community including a hotel and a saloon. He stayed longer and did better than the Russians thanks to the growth of San Francisco and the gold rush. He made his money on apples, potatoes and cattle while also using the cove beach for shipping.<sup>50</sup> Unfortunately, he severely mistreated the Kashia Indians and earned the name of "man with the big black whip".<sup>51</sup>

In 1887, his investing partner, Lord Fairfax, and a lumber man bought the fort and built a sawmill that grew into an extensive lumber industry, whose products, included firewood and tanbark.

When Lord Fairfax died in 1873, Fort Ross was sold to the <sup>SW</sup> Call family. They owned most of the land until 1973. Mr. Call and then his son carried on and expanded all the past industries ever developed at the fort. In addition, they built a ranch house of their own, founded a school, weather station, telegraph, and one of the first overland roads to Cazadero. When ocean shipping came to a close in 1925, the Call family went into sheep ranching. Thanks



to Mrs. Call, most of the remaining structures were kept intact until Fort Ross became California's 5th State Park.<sup>52</sup> In 1903, the interior of the Fort was sold to the California Landmark Committee which was later deeded over to the State Park System in 1906.<sup>53</sup> Unfortunately, the 1906 earthquake hit approximately 20 days later, and caused great damage both structurally and land wise. Most of the Fort was dislocated as much as 12 feet in either direction.

In 1916, reconstruction was begun, and perfectly good buildings were torn down to use original wood. When the original wood got scarce, this plan of operation was scrapped and the new policy became new wood. The old method is referred to as "destructive restoration".<sup>53</sup> In 1924, Highway 1 was put through the middle of the Fort. Since 1916, the Park Department has been restoring as much of the Fort as funds allow. In 1945, the bell was returned to the Chapel after being found at Vallejo's Spanish Adobe. Previous to that, it was used by the Petaluma Firehouse after being unearthed in a San Francisco junkheap in 1866.<sup>54</sup> In 1960, the Call Ranch and the land surrounding the Fort were bought with a life estate for Mr. Call until he died. After two fires in 1970 and 1971, the Highway was rerouted in 1972. The chapel and the commandants house were finished and rededicated in 1974 and the bell was recast after melting in the fire.

Future plans include a restoration of the Aleut village on the Bluff, the Kashia Pomo village located across the Highway, and the reconstruction of three more buildings. A visitor center is planned as well.<sup>55</sup> We still have many reminders of those Russian frontier days in the names of many places, from Fort Bragg to Jenner: Fort Ross, and Ross Mountain, north and to the southeast. Further



inland is St. Helena Mountain and the town of St. Helena.<sup>56</sup> In addition, the local Kashia Pomo Indians still have eight Russian words in their language. One Pomo man even showed the Fort historian and curator, John McKenzie, a daguerrotype of his great-grandmother in academic robes who married a Russian, went back to Russia to be educated and became a professor of languages in St. Petersburg, teaching French and German.<sup>57</sup>



## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Promyshleniki were men who left their homes to hunt, mine or trade, etc. to make a big profit. The term promyshleniki was a word that went back to Old Novgorod, signifying freelance explorers of natural resources.

Hector Chevigny, Russian America The Great Alaskan Venture, 1741 - 1867, pg. 10.

<sup>2</sup>H. H. Bancroft, History of California, pg. 61.

<sup>3</sup>Chevigny, op cit. pg 48-49.

<sup>4</sup>George P. Taylor, Spanish Russian Rivalry in The Pacific, 1769-1820, pg. 114-115.

<sup>5</sup>ibid, pg. 113-114.

<sup>6</sup>Adele Ogdin, The California Sea Otter Trade, 1784-1848, pg. 46.

<sup>7</sup>Bancroft, op cit. pg. 79.

<sup>8</sup>Svetlana G. Federova, "The Flag of the Russo-American Company", The Pacific Historian, pg. 27.

<sup>9</sup>Adele Ogdin, op cit. pg. 13.

<sup>10</sup>Interview with John McKenzie Fort Ross State Park Historian.

<sup>11</sup>Chevigny, op.cit. pg. 147.

<sup>12</sup>Stephen Watrous, Fort Ross The Russian Settlement in California, pg. 7.

<sup>13</sup>ibid, pg. 20.

<sup>14</sup>A. B. Duhaut - Cilly, A Visit to The Russians in 1828, pg. 4 - 5.

<sup>15</sup>Watrous, op. cit. pg. 22.

<sup>16</sup>ibid, pg. 1.

<sup>17</sup>ibid, pg. 7.

<sup>18</sup>Major Ernest Rufus, History of Sonoma County, 1880.

<sup>19</sup>Watrous, op. cit. pg. 6.

<sup>20</sup>R. A. Thompson, The Russian Settlement in California, Fort Ross, Founded 1812 Abandoned 1841, Why the Russians Came and Why They Left, pg. 12, 13.

<sup>21</sup>"Fort Ross", Holy Trinity Cathedral Church Life Bulletin, pg. 3.



- <sup>22</sup>Bancroft, op. cit. pg. 306.
- <sup>23</sup>Ibid, pg. 309.
- <sup>24</sup>August Maltr, The Visit of The "Rurik" to San Francisco in 1816.
- <sup>25</sup>Adele Ogdin, op. cit. pg. 66.
- <sup>26</sup>Watrous, op. cit. pg. 11.
- <sup>27</sup>Ibid, pg. 9.
- <sup>28</sup>Ibid, pg. 7.
- <sup>29</sup>Thompson, op. cit. pg. 12.
- <sup>30</sup>Adele Ogdin, op. cit. pg 65.
- <sup>31</sup>Judith A. Harkinson, Fort Ross: Russia's American Colony., pg. 6.
- <sup>32</sup>Watrous, op. cit. pg. 7.
- <sup>33</sup>E. L. Chernykh, "The Agriculture of Upper California", The Pacific Historian, pgs. 10-28.
- <sup>34</sup>Adele Ogdin, op. cit., pg. 96.
- <sup>35</sup>Watrous, op. cit. pg. 22.
- <sup>36</sup>Tatiana Ostroumov, "They came to a Blessed Land, The Saga of Fort Ross", The Russian Orthodox Journal, pg. 26.
- <sup>37</sup>Charles B. Hutchinson, and staff of College of Agriculture of University of California, California Agriculture, pg. 21, 22, and 23.
- <sup>38</sup>McKenzie, op cit.
- <sup>39</sup>Carol Hall, "Fort Ross", News and Views, pg. 10.
- <sup>40</sup>Adele Ogdin, op, cit. pg. 102.
- <sup>41</sup>Duhaut - Cilly, op. cit. pg. 11-12.
- <sup>42</sup>Thompson, op. cit. pg. 14-15.
- <sup>43</sup>Watrous, op. cit. pg. 22.
- <sup>44</sup>Thompson, op. cit. pg. 15-16.
- <sup>45</sup>McKenzie, op. cit.
- <sup>46</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>47</sup>Thompson, op. cit. pg 18-20.
- <sup>48</sup>Watrous, op. cit. pg 22.



49McKenzie, op. cit.

50Watrous, op. cit. pg 25.

51McKenzie, op. cit.

52Watrous, op. cit. pg. 26.

53McKenzie, op. cit.

54McKenzie, op. cit.

55Watrous, op. cit. pg. 28-30.

56Roberta M. McDow, "Russian Souvenirs", The Pacific Historian,  
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57McKenzie, op. cit.



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