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# CALIFORNIA AND RUSSIAN SETTLEMENT OF ROSS

## by Otto Von Kotzebue

From *A New Voyage Round the World in the Years 1823,24,35 and 26 (Vol. II)*  
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...It was on the 10<sup>th</sup> of September 1824, that after having made the necessary preparations for our subsequent residence in New Archangel, and having properly equipped the ship, we again put to sea, and a brisk north wind soon carried us in a southerly direction towards the fertile peninsula of California...

[After visiting Santa Clara and St. Francisco Missions]

...Indispensable business now summoned me to the establishment of the Russian-American Company called Ross, which lies about eighty miles north of St. Francisco. I had for some time been desirous of performing the journey by land, but the difficulties had appeared insurmountable. Without the assistance of the commandant [of the Presidio St. Diego, Don Jose Maria Estudillo], it certainly could not have been accomplished; I was therefore glad to avail myself of his friendly disposition towards me to make the attempt. We required a number of horses and a military escort; the latter to serve us at once as guides, and as a protection against savages. Both these requests were immediately granted; and Don Estudillo himself offered to command our escort.

My companions on this journey were Dr. Eschscholz, Mr. Hoffman, two of my officers, two sailors, Don Estudillo, and four dragoons, making altogether a party of twelve...

...Our road now lay sometimes across hills and meadows, and sometimes along the sands so near the ocean that we were sprinkled by its spray. We passed Port Romanzow [Bodega Bay], and soon after forded the bed of another shallow river to which the Russians have given the name of Slavianka. Farther inland it is said to be deeper, and even navigable for ships; its banks are extremely fertile, but peopled by numerous warlike hordes. It flows hither and from the north-east; and the Russians have proceeded up it a distance of a hundred wersts, or about sixty-seven English miles.

The region we now passed through was of a very romantic though wild character; and the luxuriant growth of the grass proved that the soil was rich. From the summit of a high hill, we at length, to our great joy, perceived beneath us the fortress of Ross, to which we descended by a tolerably convenient road. We spurred our tired horses, and excited no small astonishment as we passed through the gate at a gallop. M. Von Schmidt, the governor of the establishment, received us in the kindest manner, fired some guns to greet our arrival on Russian-American ground, and conducted us into his commodious and orderly mansion, built in the European fashion with thick beams.

The settlement of Ross, situated on the seashore, in latitude 38° 33', and on an insignificant stream, was founded in the year 1812, with the free consent of the natives, who were very useful in furnishing materials for the buildings and even in their erection.

The intention in forming this settlement was to pursue the chase of the sea-otter on the coast of California, where the animal was then numerous, as it had become extremely scarce in the more northern establishments. The Spaniards who did not hunt them, willingly took a small compensation for their acquiescence in the views of the Russians; and the sea-otter, though at present scarce even here, is more frequently caught along the Californian coast, southward from Ross, than in any other quarter. The fortress is a quadrangle, palisaded with tall, thick beams, and defended by two towers which mount fifteen cannons. The garrison consisted, on my arrival, of a hundred and thirty men, of whom a small number only were Russians, the rest Aleutians.

The Spaniards lived at first on the best terms with the new settlers, and provided them with oxen, cows, horses, and sheep; but when in process of time they began to remark that, notwithstanding the inferiority of soil and climate, the Russian establishment became more flourishing than theirs, envy, and apprehension of future danger, took possession of their minds: they then required that the settlement should be abandoned,—asserted that their rights of dominion extended northward quite to the Icy Sea, and threatened to support their claims by force of arms.

The founder and then commander of the fortress of Ross, a man of penetration, and one not easily frightened, gave a very decided answer. He had, he said, at the command of his superiors, settled in this region, which had not previously been in the possession of any other power, and over which, consequently, none had a right by the natives; that these latter had freely consented to his occupation of the land, and

therefore that he would yield to no such unfounded pretension as that now advanced by the Spaniards, but should be always ready to resist force by force.

Perceiving that the Russians would not comply with their absurd requisitions, and considering that they were likely to be worsted in an appeal to arms, the Spaniards quietly gave up all farther thought of hostilities, and entered again into friendly communications with our people; since which the greatest unity has subsisted between the two nations. The Spaniards often find Ross very serviceable to them. For instance, there is no such thing as a smith in all California; consequently the making and repairing of all manner of iron implements here is a great accommodation to them, and affords lucrative employment to the Russians. The dragoons who accompanied us, had brought a number of old gunlocks to be repaired.

In order that the Russians might not extend their dominion to the northern shore of the Bay of St. Francisco, the Spaniards immediately founded the missions of St. Gabriel and St. Francisco Salona. It is a great pity that we were not beforehand with them. The advantages of possessing this beautiful bay are incalculable, especially as we have no harbour but the bad one of Bodega or Port Romanzow.

The inhabitants of Ross live in the greatest concord with the Indians, who repair, in considerable numbers, to the fortress, and work as day-labourers, for wages. At night they usually remain outside the palisades. They willingly give their daughters in marriage to Russians and Aleutians; and from these unions ties of relationship have arisen which strengthen the good understanding between them. The inhabitants of Ross have often penetrated singly far into the interior, when engaged in the pursuit of deer or other game, and have passed whole nights among different Indian tribes, without ever having experienced any inconvenience. This the Spaniards dare not venture upon. The more striking the contrast between the two nations in their treatment of the savages, the more ardently must every friend to humanity rejoice on entering the Russian territory.

The Greek Church does not make converts by force. Free from fanaticism, she preaches only toleration and love. She does not even admit of persuasion, but trusts wholly to conviction for proselytes, who, when once they enter her communion, will always find her a loving mother. How different had been the conduct both of Catholic priests and Protestant missionaries!

The climate at Ross is mild. Reaumur's thermometer seldom falls to the freezing point; yet gardens cannot flourish, on account of the frequent fogs. Some wersts farther inland, beyond the injurious influence of the fog, plants of the warmest climates prosper surprisingly. Cucumbers of fifty pounds weight, gourds of sixty-five, and other fruits in proportion, are produced in them. Potatoes yield a hundred or two hundred fold, and, as they will produce two crops in a year, are an effectual security against famine. The fortress is surrounded by wheat and barley fields, which, on account of the fogs, are less productive than those of Santa Clara, but which still supply sufficient corn for the inhabitants of Ross. The Aleutians find their abode here so agreeable, that although very unwilling to leave their islands, they are seldom inclined to return to them.

The Spaniards should take a lesson in husbandry from M. Von Schmuidt, who has brought it to an admirable degree of perfection. Implements, equal to the best we have in Europe, are made here under his direction. Our Spanish companions were struck with admiration at what he had done; but what astonished them most, was the effect of a windmill; they had never before seen a machine so ingenious, and so well adapted to its purpose.

Ross is blest with an abundance of the finest wood for building. The sea provides it with the most delicious fish, the land with an inexhaustible quantity of the best kinds of game; and, notwithstanding the want of a good harbour, the northern settlements might easily find in this a plentiful magazine for the supply of all their wants. Two ships had already run in here from Stapel.

The Indians of Ross are so much like those of the missions, that they may well be supposed to belong to the same race, however different their language. They appear indeed by no means so stupid, and are much more cheerful and contented than at the missions, where a deep melancholy always clouds their faces, and their eyes are constantly fixed upon the ground; but this difference is only the natural result of the different treatment they experience. They have no permanent residence, but wander about naked, and when not employed by the Russians as day-labourers, follow no occupation but the chase. They are not difficult in the choice of their food, but consume the most disgusting things, not excepting all kinds of worms and insects, with good appetite, only avoiding poisonous snakes. For the winter they lay up a provision of acorns and wild rye: the latter grows here very abundantly. When it is ripe, they burn the straw away from it, and thus roast the corn, which is then raked together, mixed with acorns, and eaten without any farther preparation. The Indians here have invented several games of chance: they are passionately fond of gaming, and often play away everything they possess. Should the blessing of civilization ever be extended to the rude

inhabitants of these regions, the merit will be due to the Russian settlements, certainly not to the Spanish missions.

After a stay of two days, we took leave of the estimable M. Von Schmidt, and returned by the same way that we came, without meeting with any remarkable occurrence. Professor Eschscholtz remained at Ross, in order to prosecute some botanical researches, intending to rejoin us by means of an Aleutian baidar, several of which were shortly to proceed to St. Francisco in search of otters. This promised chase was a gratifying circumstance to me, as I had it in contemplation to examine several of the rivers that fall into the Bay of St. Francisco, for which purpose the small Aleutian vessels would probably prove extremely serviceable. The north-west wind is prevalent here during summer, and rain is unknown in that season: it was now, however the latter end of October, and southerly gales began to blow, accompanied by frequent showers; we had therefore to wait some time for the baidars and Professor Eschscholtz...

The Californian winter being now fairly set in, we had much rain and frequent storms. On the 9<sup>th</sup> of October the south-west wind blew with the violence of the West-Indian tornado, rooted up the strongest trees, tore off the roofs of the houses, and occasioned great devastation in the cultivated lands. One of our thickest cables broke; and if the second had given way, we would have been driven on the rocky shore of the channel which unites the bay with the sea, where a powerful current struggling with the tempest produced a frightful surf. Fortunately, the extreme violence of the storm lasted only a few hours, but in the short time it caused a destructive inundation: the water spread so rapidly over the low lands, that our people had scarcely time to secure the tent, with the astronomical apparatus. On comparing the time of the day at St. Petersburg and St. Francisco, by means of the difference of longitude, it appears that the tremendous inundation at the former city took place not only on the same day, but even began in the same hour as that in California. Several hundred miles westward, on the Sandwich Islands, the wind raged with similar fury at the same time, as it did also still farther off, upon the Philippine Islands, where it was accompanied by an earthquake. So violent was the storm in the Bay of Manilla, (usually so safe a harbour,) that a French corvette, at anchor there, under the command of Captain Bougainville, a son of the celebrated navigator, was entirely dismasted, as we afterwards heard, on the Sandwich Islands, and at Manilla itself. This hurricane, therefore, raged at the same time over the greatest part of the northern hemisphere; the causes which produced it may possibly have originated beyond our atmosphere...

...The arrival of Dr. Escholtz and the baidars from Ross was still delayed, and I really began to fear that some misfortune had befallen them in the tempest: my joy therefore was extreme, when at last, on the 12<sup>th</sup> of October, the baidars, twenty in number, entered the harbour undamaged, and we received our friend again safe and well. The little flotilla had indeed left Ross before the commencement of the hurricane, but had fortunately escaped any injury from it, by taking refuge at a place called *Cap de los Reges*, till its fury was expended: but the voyagers had been obliged to bivouack on the naked rock, without shelter from the weather, and with very scanty provisions. Dr. Eschscholtz, however, not in the slightest degree disheartened by the difficulties he had undergone, was quite ready to join the voyage I had meditated for the examination of the adjacent rivers.

[From a copy of the 1967 edition in the Fort Ross Library]