



19005 Coast Highway One, Jenner, CA 95450 ■ 707.847.3437 ■ [info@fortross.org](mailto:info@fortross.org) ■ [www.fortross.org](http://www.fortross.org)

---

Title: Totma, A Small Russian Town

Author (s): Elya Vasilyeva

Source: Fort Ross Conservancy Library

URL: <http://www.fortross.org/lib.html>

Unless otherwise noted in the manuscript, each author maintains copyright of his or her written material.

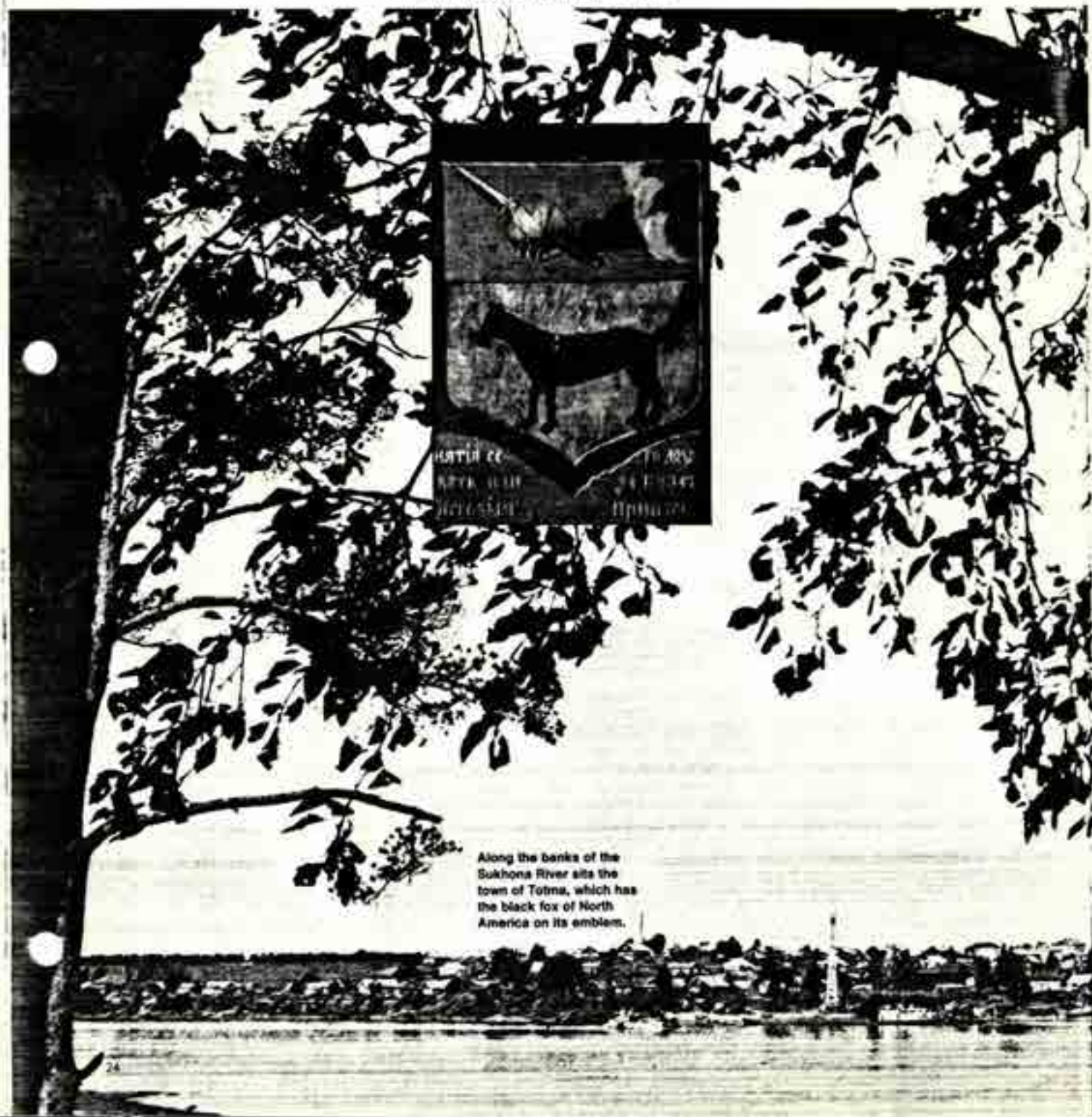
**Fort Ross Conservancy** (FRC) asks that you acknowledge FRC as the distributor of the content; if you use material from FRC's online library, we request that you link directly to the URL provided. If you use the content offline, we ask that you credit the source as follows: "Digital content courtesy of Fort Ross Conservancy, [www.fortross.org](http://www.fortross.org); author maintains copyright of his or her written material."

**Also please consider becoming a member of Fort Ross Conservancy** to ensure our work of promoting and protecting Fort Ross continues: <http://www.fortross.org/join.htm>.

This online repository, funded by Renova Fort Ross Foundation, is brought to you by Fort Ross Conservancy, a 501(c)(3) and California State Park cooperating association. FRC's mission is to connect people to the history and beauty of Fort Ross and Salt Point State Parks.

# Totma, a small Russian town

By Elya Vosilyeva  
Photographs by Alexander Lyskin



Along the banks of the  
Sukhona River sits the  
town of Totma, which has  
the black fox of North  
America on its emblem.

*Few Russians know about the town of Totma, and even seasoned journalists sometimes ask, "Where's that?" Be that as it may, some very interesting pages of Russian and American history are connected with this small provincial town tucked away in the swamps and forests of the Russian North.*

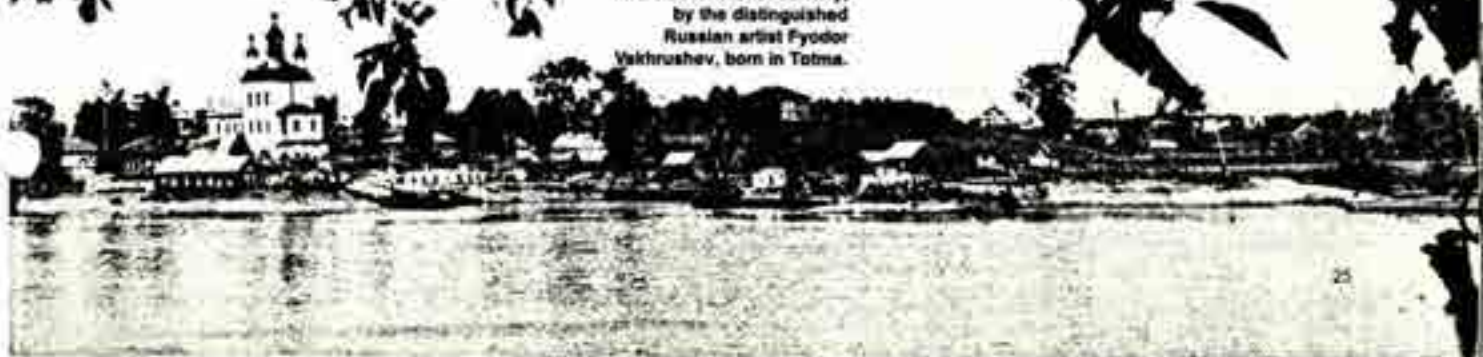


**T**otma is the home town of Ivan Kuskov, the founder of Fort Ross, a Russian settlement in northern California. The well-preserved house in which he lived can still be seen at the Fort Ross Museum. Kuskov was 24 when he left the town and crossed the Pacific with a group of Russian manufacturers. They reached the coast of America in 1789. He spent 33 years of his life exploring and studying the American continent. In addition to Fort Ross, he built a shipyard and promoted cattle breeding and farming in the area. For his services in developing "Russian America," the Russian Government awarded him a gold medal and conferred upon him the title of commercial adviser.

To get to Totma from the regional center of Vologda, you have to take the same route that Kuskov took more than 150 years ago when he returned from America, that is, along the wide and gently flowing Sukhona River. Apparently the banks are the same as they had been in his



**Inset above: The town in the seventeenth century, by the distinguished Russian artist Fyodor Vakhrushev, born in Totma.**



time—dark forests, fields and swamps stretch as far as the eye can see. A cold northern sky hangs overhead. Villages are few and far between. Then suddenly around the bend, on a steep bank, his home town appears. It is simply beautiful. One can imagine how thrilled the newly-made commercial adviser must have been at the sight of it after being away for so long. Unfortunately, Kuskov died only a year after returning home.

#### An American Animal on Its Emblem

There seems to be no end to the epithets that people prominent in Russian culture have given the town. They have called it "a magical town," "out of a fairy tale," and the like.

Totma is older than Moscow or Vologda, which are over 800 years old. People had settled in Totma even before the Slavs. Archaeologists have discovered the encampments of Neolithic people along the banks of the Sukhona.

During the thirteenth century salt mines were discovered on the outskirts of the town. Scholars maintain that the first saltens in Russia were set up here. Thanks to the abundance of timber and fur-bearing animals, and the development of cattle breeding and various crafts, the town grew rapidly. A document dated 1623 states that there were 119 houses and 20 churches within and around the wooden fortress wall with its four watchtowers. The people of Totma sold salt, fur, grain, flax, timber, tar, wax and honey.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the town found itself at the hub of the trade routes linking Russia with the countries of Western Europe, on the one hand, and Siberia and the Far East, on the other. As many as a thousand river vessels sailed past Totma during the navigating season. The residents of the town received Russian princes, ambassadors from Europe, foreign dealers and travelers. Totma merchants traded with Siberia and Kamchatka, as well as with Europe. They had their own ships in the Japan and China seas.

In 1741 the packet boats of Alexei Chirikov and Vitus Bering reached the coast of America, south of Alaska. Immediately after this expedition financed by the government, which yielded information about the rich breeding grounds of marine animals, was completed, private companies rapidly began to develop the Aleutian Islands and the northwestern coast of America. This ultimately led to the setting up of Russian America.

The vessels of Totma merchants participated in the first expeditions to the shores of the North American continent. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to say that during the second half of the eighteenth century every section of the population in Totma, from the peasants to the town head, was, in one way or another, connected with the affairs of Russian America. It's interesting to note that a state decree dated 1780 endorsed "a black fox on a golden field" as the town's emblem. This was none other than the black fox of North America from the Fox Islands, which had been discovered by a Totma merchant named Pyotr Shishkin.

#### Russian Baroque

The merchants, traders and seafarers of Totma were daring, hard-working and self-confident men. They returned to their homeland not only rich, but hardened by privation, cold and hunger, with their ranks sadly depleted at times. Their profits enabled them to contribute generously to the church in thanksgiving for the happy issue of their voyages and in commemoration of their dead comrades. As a result, stone architecture flourished in Totma during the eighteenth century. Beautiful new churches were built to replace the old ones. About 20 specimens of Totma architecture from those times have been preserved to this day.

These tall white, remarkably elegant churches look like sailing vessels against the northern sky. Nowhere else in our vast country can Russian baroque church architecture be seen in such originality.

The main distinguishing feature of the architecture is

the unusual stone patterns and ornaments. Cartouches, which are characteristic of baroque interiors and used for heraldic bearings, inscriptions and frames for icons or wall paintings, are everywhere. Cartouches can also be found on old geographical maps, where they encircle the titles. To this day, cartouches are symbols of seafaring and geographical discoveries. Perhaps it was from nautical maps that they were transferred to the walls of Totma's churches.

The reflection of the age of great voyages in architecture is not a new phenomenon in world culture. The Spanish have a style called plateresque. When you see the flowers, seashells, crosses and stars around the Totma cartouches, you're reminded of Salamanca, where the houses are painted with seashells, seaweed and exotic sea animals. It is remarkable that architecture in countries as far apart as Spain and Russia should reflect the era of great geographical discoveries in a similar manner.

#### Kennedy in Totma

Why did the Totmayans rebuild their churches? Why were they not satisfied with the old ones? What inspired them to create a style of their own? Who built these masterpieces? How was it that such a significant phenomenon of Russian culture had not come to the public notice for so long?

Stanislav Zaitsev, a man madly in love with this town, is looking for the answers to these and other questions. He drew a large audience when he gave a lecture and showed his films about Totma at the Polytechnical Museum in Moscow. His movies, incidentally, have won prizes and diplomas at nationwide amateur film festivals.

After Zaitsev received his first film award, he was asked if he was surprised. "No, I wasn't," he replied. "It was only natural because the film was about Totma, and it's the best town there is!"

Zaitsev is quite an unusual person. After he graduated from an institute and received a certificate as a lumber engineer, he worked in the field for only three years. Then he gave up his profession and went to work in a museum, then at a school and later at a theater. He is now working as an artist, making souvenirs. This incongruity between his job and his real love bewilders many. "Can you imagine? An institute graduate with a good profession, and look what he's doing!"



A modern engraving of an old portrait of Ivan Kuskov (1765-1823). The house in which Kuskov spent the last year of his life still stands today in Totma. The embankment of the Sukhona River is named after this great man, and the local studies museum has a permanent exhibition devoted to the major events of his life. Facing page, top: The famous Totma dymniki (decorative chimney tops). Bottom: Thanks to restorers like Edward Trofimov, the cupolas of this old church will glisten in the Sun again.



Stanislav Zaitsev and his Requiem for John F. Kennedy. Below: Examples of cartouches on Totma's churches. Bottom: An old photo of Totma at the turn of the century. (From the collection of the town museum.)



Facing page, top: Blacksmith Nikolai Dityatev, a worthy successor of Totma's masters. The pieces that he executes are beautifully simple, yet elaborate at the same time. Many of his creations are in the local museum. Bottom: Descendants of Totma's seafarers.

Sometimes he can be a bit aggressive. At the same time, you feel as though he is remarkably sincere and ingenuous. Most of the time Zaitsev roams around Totma with his camera, writes complaints to different agencies about the bad condition of this or that cultural relic or rummages through the archives.

He lives in an old wooden house with thick log walls. A large Russian stove stands in the middle. The walls are hung with icons that he has picked up in all sorts of places. He's planning to restore them and give them to the town museum. Incidentally, the dining room is furnished in modern style, which contrasts sharply with the rest of the house. There are a number of old Russian books that belonged to his mother—she was a historian. But the most surprising thing of all is a large picture, by Zaitsev himself, titled *Requiem for John F. Kennedy*.

"I was shocked when I learned about Kennedy's assassination. I hate any kind of violence. It upset me for a long time. Only after I painted this picture did I feel a little bit better.

"You'll understand my interest in Americans if you know the story of my family," Zaitsev explained.

Five days after Nazi Germany attacked the Soviet Union, his father, who had been wounded, was taken prisoner. He was moved from one concentration camp to another. Just a few days before the end of the war, he and a group of other prisoners were taken out to be shot by the SS. "Who knows if he would have survived had not the Americans turned up there that same day. They picked him up—he was alive but bleeding heavily—and flew him to a hospital in France. He recovered. Although he was considered missing for many years, he 'walked' home in American boots, a gift from the Allies across the ocean. I still have those boots."

"What is your main occupation?"

He got out a piece of drawing paper on which Totma was portrayed the way it looked 100 years ago.

"Here, on paper, I have repaired and restored everything. Do you know how the strange name of our town is explained? Some say it comes from the phrase 'To tma,' which means, 'that's the backwoods.' Many Totmayans, especially the young people, left for other places. We have to restore the town and its priceless treasures and set up museums. Many people will come to admire our beautiful community. That is my dream, and I'm doing everything I can to make it come true."

He truly is doing everything he can. When a local official ordered that an eighteenth century monastery tower be torn down, Zaitsev stood in protest at the foot of the tower, which had been encircled by a steel rope. Then he wrote a complaint to the public prosecutor. The upshot was that the tower remained intact.

What is Zaitsev, a lone champion? Wasn't a law to protect our cultural heritage adopted several years ago? What was the opinion of the local officials on that score?

#### "I Do Not Share His Nostalgia"

Tamara Chukhina, first secretary of Totma's party committee, explained, "Zaitsev wants to see Totma the way it was a hundred years ago. That's impossible. After all, we have to think of the people who live here now, in the late twentieth century. I do not share his nostalgia."

But isn't it possible to blend modern housing and the remains of the past?

"That is exactly what we are striving for. The most valuable monuments have been put under government protection. Many of our churches are surrounded by scaffolding, and the restorers get a hand from Moscow students during the summer. We plan to preserve and totally restore scores of monuments of history and architecture.

"But the most noteworthy feature in the life of the town in recent years is the unprecedented scope of municipal and industrial construction. That gives me special satisfaction. The construction is partly connected with impor-







Nadezhda Kopyayeva, a shop assistant, and Marina Kornetsova, a bookkeeper, are the soloists of a local amateur band. Inset: Alexandra Kukanova, 69, and her granddaughter Svetlana. Kukanova is a well-known weaver in Tolma. She specializes in long carpets.



tant projects like the building of the Northern Lights gas pipeline and the reconstruction of the rural districts of the Non-Black Soil Zone of the Russian Federation."

Tamara Chukhina went on to say that for the past 10 years housing development has been in full swing in Totma. A high school for 1,000 students, several child-care centers, a bus station, a restaurant and a service center are among the new buildings.

"Life has become much more comfortable," Chukhina said, "and the results are telling. More young people have stayed on, and many have actually come back home after living for some time in other places."

While the first secretary of the town party committee was speaking with such enthusiasm about new housing, this writer was thinking to herself about the standard ferrocement "boxes" that were so out of tune with the architecture of the old town.

"Do you think I like these boxes? Of course I don't. The design organizations still don't take the specific architecture of the town into account. They suggest whatever is simplest and cheapest to build."

But here, too, there will be changes for the better. A special touch will be introduced on the façades of the new buildings of light-colored brick. It will be cartouches like the ones that decorate the old buildings of Totma. That was Zaitsev's idea.

#### Filmed in Hollywood

Maria Trofimova belongs to that species of human beings who cannot imagine life without public activity. Although she is now retired on pension, she works as a volunteer on the historical and collecting committee that has been set up within the Town Soviet. Together with schoolchildren, Trofimova has organized a museum of war valor and labor achievements. Under her guidance, the youngsters gather material from all over the country—photographs, personal belongings, diaries, letters and government awards of their distinguished fellow citizens, who include war heroes, well-known artists, actors and writers.

"They're extremely interesting people who have lived exemplary lives," Trofimova explained. "It's very worthwhile for the children to know about them."

Trofimova lives with her son, a schoolteacher. She has a fine library of 3,000 books. Maria's hobby is gathering medicinal herbs and making decoctions. Her friends and neighbors, just about the whole town, are welcome to use her remedies and borrow her books.

Close family, professional and social ties are characteristic of any small town, but, in addition, all kinds of public activities bring the residents of Totma even closer together. The town has a club for photographers, a public board of the museum of local studies (incidentally, the best in the region), a council for the protection of historical and cultural monuments, an all-volunteer environmental protection group and a War Veterans Council. The latter is somewhat of a club for front-line veterans. More than 11,000 Totmayans fought in the Great Patriotic War (1941-1945), and 6,296 fell in action. Many of the veterans are invalids.

Totmayans revere the memory of their townspeople, and quite a number of streets have been named after them. An obelisk has been erected in the main square in memory of the war dead. It was put up on the initiative of the War Veterans Council, of which Pavel Filyov is a most active member.

A book has been written about the wartime exploits of Filyov, and a film about him is now being made at the local amateur studio. He was also the subject of a film made in Hollywood in 1943.

Filyov served on the convoys that sailed via the Arctic to the United States with strategic cargo that was exchanged for American arms and supplies. Those were long, stormy miles, with fighting all the way—a grim test

of strength for all the members of the crew. "No naval education to speak of, but quick-witted, strong-spirited and reliable in emergency,"—these words come from Pavel Filyov's ship's character reference.

"When we went to the United States, we spoke at clubs, on the deck of our ship, at film studios and at antifascist meetings about the battle that Russia was waging against fascist Germany. I remember when American film makers shot newsreels of our stay in the United States, and once in San Francisco they showed us a film about Soviet seamen. I have a few things to say about the Arctic and the United States. I have written a long story about the ocean crossings we made and hope to publish it soon," Filyov said.

"I didn't know at the time," he added, "that I would be the first Totmayan to visit San Francisco since Ivan Kuskov."

#### A Teacher Takes the Floor

Margarita Shananina is assistant principal at a high school in Totma. She also teaches Russian language and literature. Year in and year out she has to go over the same thing and therefore runs the risk of "developing the habit of using her old notes," as she says. However, she keeps looking for new facts and new methods, and this constant search is communicated to her students.

Shananina believes that literature is one of the most powerful ways of molding character. It is logical to hear such an assertion in Totma. The northern part of Russia, which did not experience the Tatar-Mongol invasion, has always been one of the most literate regions of the country. Children

were taught in the home, which is why you often find handwritten books and very old printed books (very rare documents now) cherished in many families to this day.

Totma is a town of avid readers. I saw some fine libraries in the homes I visited. A love for books is cultivated here from childhood. It's a tradition that is being passed on from one generation to the next. It's no wonder then that young people are keen on literature, especially poetry.

The school's literary museum exhibits documents, letters and photographs devoted to the life and work of the popular Soviet poet Nikolai Rubtsov (1936-1971), who was born in a little village not far from Totma. Rubtsov went to school in Totma. He loved the town and wrote about it. Many people still remember him, and they have set up a museum in his honor.

The purpose of the museum, according to Shananina, is not only to perpetuate the memory of a poet born in these parts, but also "to cultivate a feeling for poetry in our children." The children of Totma know and love poetry. Interesting evenings of poetry and poetry contests are held at the school. One reading was even telecast.

Much of the credit for these cultural activities goes to people like Margarita Shananina who represent the type of Russian teachers who have always lighted up the provincial areas of Russia with their spirituality.

I left Totma in the early morning on board a motorship. The Sun was rising over the edge of the horizon, and the sea gulls were crying. Towheaded youngsters were already sitting on the banks of the river with fishing rods in their hands, and women were heading for the woods to pick bilberries.

I recalled the picturesque little streets of the old town and thought how wonderful it is that such cozy little towns still exist in Russia.

I threw a coin into the Sukhona to make sure I would return here some day, though I knew I would anyway. ■

Tamara Chukhina, first secretary of the town party committee.



A still from a film made in Hollywood in February 1943. Pavel Filyov is the center man in the top row.