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Russian Windmill - Photo By: Paul C. Miller

Fort Ross State Historic Park, Jenner, CA

Replica Russian Windmill Gifted to Fort Ross

A Symbol of Peace Linking two Nations

By Sandy Jones Birkland

A drive up the Sonoma Coast on Thursday October 18, 2012 to see the Russian-built windmill was an experience to remember. Arriving at Fort Ross State Historic Park, the thirty-nine foot tall, log-framed post windmill stood on the bluff overlooking the ocean as a testament of the Russian settlers 200 years ago. The weather, unusual for the Northern California coast, was sunny, clear and not a breath of wind in the forecast. This made for a beautiful setting for the Russian ceremony to bless and unveil the mill, but defiantly not a milling day. The windmill completion was timed to be a part of the 200th anniversary of the Fort's founding.



A bird's-eye view of the mill and its location to the Pacific Ocean. The mill is turned away from prevailing winds in this photo. (photo by Paul C. Miller)

The event was comprised of a small group of constituents involved in the mill project and Russian Orthodox clergy who were there to bless the mill. The Russian cultural and historic foundation The Link of Times Foundation had two representatives on hand, including Rinat Umarov and founder and financier of the project, Viktor Vekselberg. Others in attendance were the architects from the leading Architectural and Restoration Firm, Page and Turnbull, the contractor Keith Alward, of Alward Construction and crew, California State Park staff, Fort Ross Conservancy members, and of course the Russian craftsman Alexander Popov and Anton Maltsev and their interpreter Alex Tereshkin. SPOOMers Rob Grassi along with Sandy and Bob Birkland also attended the unveiling to learn about this unique mill, and to report for Old Mill News.

The event unfolded with the Russian Orthodox Church blessing the mill, speaking only Russian. A moving event as the words were unrecognizable to us, but the meaning clear, to bless this mill at Fort Ross as a symbol of peace, to show the unity of history between Russia and America.

The Russian speakers from the Link of Times Foundation, via a translator, dedicated the mill to the California State Parks, as a gift, explaining that the early settlers had come in peace to establish a colony to supply food for Fort Ross and the Russian colony in Alaska. This mill was a symbol of that unity between two nations and their unique connection in history.



Clergy from the Russian Orthodox church blessing the mill, Viktor Vekselberg from Link of Times and Renova Fort Ross Foundation and on his left, Liz Burko, State Park Superintendent, during dedication ceremony.

The decision to build a fortress and a permanent Russian settlement in California in 1812, was taken by Russian merchant Alexandr Baranov, who had been assigned by the Russian-American company to manage the Russian settlements in America. The importance of the mill at the settlement was to provide milled grain for the Ross settlement and other Russian colonies in Sitka, Alaska and along the Aleutian Islands. The windmill will enrich the story of the settlement that park staff interpret to hundreds of visitors, school children and at special event celebrations held throughout the year.

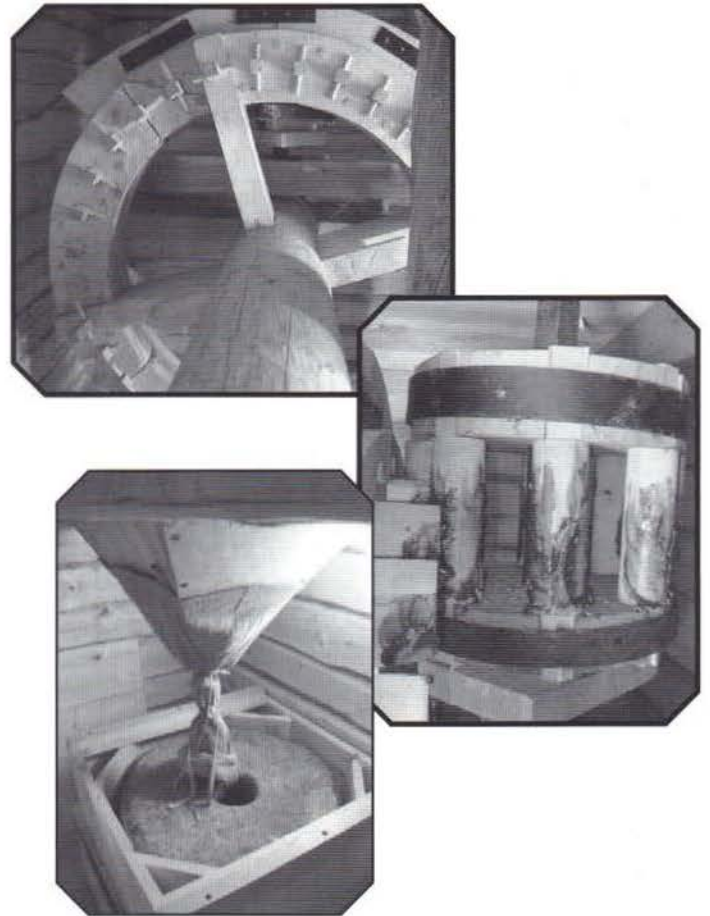
The ceremony concluded with turning the windmill into the "wind" which unfortunately there was barely a breeze, so by hand, the craftsman took turns spinning the mill by the wooden sails/arms, and of course, a toast of champagne.



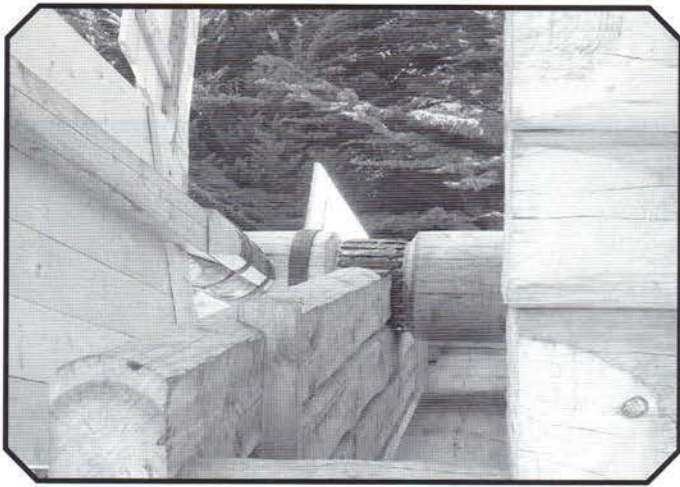
The windmill facing into the wind on the Saturday public unveiling of the mill and the Fort Ross annual Harvest Festival.

Once the event was over, we met with Alexander and Anton the Russian craftsman to discuss the project through Alex the interpreter, along with Keith, the American contracted to run the project at Fort Ross State Historic Park. We explained our role in the world of mills and were warmly received by them with an instant connection. We climbed the wooden hanging ladder/stairs onto the porch and then into the mill. The first level holds the main shaft, gears, and tenter arm for the stones and the spout from the stones. The second level houses the stones, hopper and miniature stone box frame. The construction of the mill was all handmade with axes, adzes, chisels, draw knives and hand saws. Alexander and Anton explained via Alex the translator, who also helped reconstruct the mill at Fort Ross, this was their first mill they ever built. Back in Russia, both men, who are architects and craftsman for the Restoration Centre. When they were selected to reconstruct this mill, they had to begin with learning about mills of that time period and do research in the region of Russia where there were similar mills. The craftsman built the mill in Kirillov, Russia, a

city where windmills had traditionally been built, using designs and techniques that evolved since 1100 AD. It took 4 months to build the mill in Russia, where it was then shipped to Northern California where it took 3 weeks to assemble at Ft. Ross and get to operating condition. None of the Russian windmills of this time period still operate, but some still stand, for this is how they were able to build a replica mill. They used Spruce, Pine and Birch to build the mill, all held together by pegs.



After taking lots of photographs and looking at the craftsmanship, we all sat on the porch overlooking the bluff out to the ocean. We shared mill information and just enjoyed hanging out together as like-minded people who appreciate the craftsmanship of old buildings and reconstructed windmills. In a moment of reflection, I commented on how beautiful it was that day and how the Russian explorers must have found this location on a day like it was that day. A glorious day, but not common for the North Coast of California and the Russian's agreed it was the nicest day they had seen since they began the project 3 weeks prior. Hence the reason why the windmill was in a good location, as it is generally very windy almost every day.

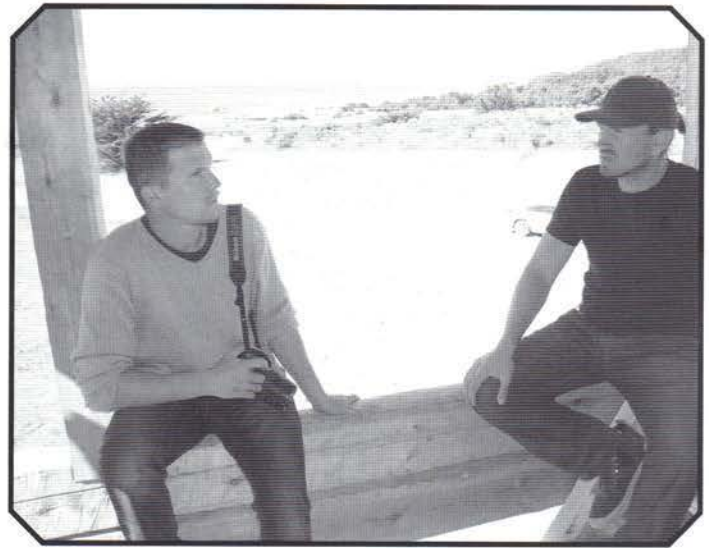


Outer wind-shaft bearing

Alexander Popov said it was an interesting project that he felt fortunate to be chosen. Starting in 2010 the project was very uncertain and vague according to Popov. Keith Alward stated that it was a real accomplishment to bring something from two centuries ago to present. The original Fort Ross windmill was the first windmill constructed in California. It was built two years after the colony was founded to hunt sea otter, provide food for similar settlements in Alaska and act as a trading post. The Russians stayed until 1841, when the fort was sold to John Sutter of Sacramento. The original windmill was one of two at Fort Ross. The second was to pound tanbark for oil used in leather tanning. Fort Ross replica windmill is the only working (“traditionally-crafted”) Russian post-style (“stolbolvka”) windmill in the world, fitted with a pair of 200-year-old mill stones and the ability to actually use wind-power to grind the grain.

On Saturday, October 20th, Fort Ross State Historic Park held their annual Harvest Festival and unveiled the windmill for the public. On this day the wind was in true form. By the afternoon, the mill was turned into the wind and started spinning and milling grain. (See Youtube video Russian Windmill Fort Ross). Fort Ross park staff and the Fort Ross Conservancy now will have their hands full. As you all know, there is a lot to operate a mill and to keep it preserved even if it sits idle. The staff has a lot to learn and hopefully the assistance of the California SPOOMers from the Bale Grist Mill in St. Helena can help with the process.

The weekend ended with Alexander, Anton, Alex, Keith and his wife Barbara, visiting the Bale Mill during the annual Old Mill Days event. It was exciting to show them a water-powered mill from the 1850’s era. I believe after their project and a visit to the Bale Mill, they have become true mill enthusiasts. Hopefully we have encouraged them to become SPOOM members.



Anton and Alex enjoying the view. This was the nicest day they had experienced during the three week mill building project at Fort Ross.

For more information on the research and building of the mill, go to Fort Ross Windmill.com or www.fortross.org.

Fort Ross is open weekends year-round. Park grounds are open from sunrise to sunset. The fort compound, visitor center, and all other facilities are open from 10:00am to 4:30pm.

Open Fridays, Saturdays, Sundays and Holidays until September 3.

Open Saturdays, Sundays and Holidays after September 3 except Thanksgiving Day and Christmas Day.



There are no barriers when friendships are made between mill enthusiasts and like-minded preservationists, though the language of speech may be different, the appreciation of craftsmanship is universal.

Back-left to right: Rob, Matthew, Keith, Sandy, Alexander Front-left to right: Anton and Alex