

PEOPLING ROSS' PAST

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, there has been a very active archaeological effort at Fort Ross State Historic Park. There has been a three-year excavation of the Native Alaskan Village Site by the University of California, Berkeley, and a two-year project excavating the Ross cemetery by the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. The information gained from the excavations, and the unique efforts and cooperation of archaeologists, have assisted park staff in interpreting the lifeways of local natives, Native Alaskans, and ethnic Russians at this outpost colony on the California coast.

Late in the year 1841, time had run out on a colorful, unique, historically significant chapter in California history. When manager Alexander Gavrilovich Rotchev and the few remaining colonists from the Russian-American Company outpost on the Northern California Coast set sail from Bodega Bay for Alaska, they left a legacy which would live on to the present. The small outpost at Fort Ross was a short-lived endeavor (1812-1841) but today visitors from all over the globe come to view the site of this "outpost of an empire."

The history of the Russian occupation of the site is interpreted for the visiting public by the California Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR). Since the acquisition of the site in 1903, millions have marvelled at the uniquely Russian architecture of the buildings and stockade, which were either preserved or restored. Unfortunately, after the settlement's buildings, livestock, and ranching implements were sold to John Sutter of New Helvetia in 1841, much of the original appearance changed. Sutter dismantled and removed most of the structures including at least one windmill and threshing floor. During the sub-

sequent 62 years, the site was owned and operated by several ranchers who altered or removed most of the remaining structures. In fact, at one time, colony manager Rotchev's house, the only remaining original building, was used as a hotel, and the Russian Orthodox chapel, now restored, was used as a stable.

It is no wonder, then, that the DPR, since its earliest days as stewards of the site, went about the task of restoring or reconstructing the eye-catching, rough-hewn log architecture which had become an enigmatic attraction on the sparsely populated Sonoma County coast. Also, shortly after the park acquired the site, the 1906 earthquake damaged all of the remaining Russian structures and toppled the Orthodox chapel. Therefore, in 1916 work was begun on restoration of the chapel. In doing so, the best remaining Russian-built building, the Russian-America Company barracks, was dismantled to provide original Russian-cut timbers for the chapel. Next, the southern, eight-sided blockhouse was inaccurately reconstructed in 1922. The Rotchev House was restored in 1925, part of the stockade wall was rebuilt in 1929, and in 1949, the northern,

seven-sided blockhouse was reconstructed.

It was not until 1953 that the first professional archaeological excavations at Fort Ross were conducted by Adan E. Treganza. The goals of these excavations were to establish the locations of the original stockade wall and the settlement's well. With the notable exception of excavations done during the realignment of California State Highway 1 in 1971-72, all archaeological excavations were concerned with the settlement's stockade walls and the buildings therein. The highway, prior to 1972, traveled through the center of the stockade. In trying to restore the stockade's integrity, evidence of much historic activity outside the enclosure was discovered. The most significant discovery was an historic burial site containing the remains of a European male around whose neck hung a small metal cross of typical Russian Orthodox design.

In recent years, it has come to light that much of the activity at Fort Ross actually took place outside the stockade walls, where the majority of the settlement's population lived. The colony comprised a multiethnic community, composed of Europeans, Creoles (offspring of Russian and Native North American parents), Native Alaskans and Native Californians. In fact, it was the large native work force that built the formidable structures we now see restored, hunted marine mammals (the colony's most profitable commercial venture), built ships for trade and transport, and harvested the crops planted at Fort Ross and at the other Russian ranches in the area.

Extensive archival work by Alexei Istomin, Richard Pierce, Sannie Osborn, and Glenn Farris, and archaeological excavations by Kent Lightfoot and Lynne Goldstein at Fort Ross, and by Aron Crowell in Alaska, have given us new information which provides us with not only a different look at the operation and function of this outpost, but also an insight into the people of Fort Ross.

Let us take a quick glimpse of a day in the lives of these regular residents of Fort Ross, as seen in an excerpt of a paper given at the meetings

of the Alaska Anthropological Association (Murley 1992):

A heavy dripping fog hung on the coast this early morning in the late spring of 1818. The inhabitants of Ross now awaken and approach another day in this solitary settlement in a strange and distant land, where "God is in his heaven and the Czar is very far away." With the rising sun, the activity in front of the stockade had reached a fever pitch. The loud gruff voice of the Prikazhik Dorofeev pierced the early morning air. Kayaks with legs moved from in front of the huts down the steep path to the sandy cove. These craft had been recently refurbished, many with new laftak skins, after last season's foray.

Nikita kissed his wife and turned to load his gear into his craft. Although food for the voyage was provided by the company, Miyacha had made him some of his favorite local treats. These he packed away carefully in his waterproof skin bag. On the long voyage, these would remind him of the happy days he had spent with his wife at Ross.

Sulkaheya placed one hand on the hunter's shoulder and with the other offered a prize which made Nikita's eyes widen. "Forget that silly slate blade or whatever you call it. Here, take this, and may your darts and spears be swift and true."

Into Nikita's hand Sulkaheya slowly slipped a magnificent chipped stone blade. Its shiny black surface gleamed and each tiny flake scar glistened. The ten inch razor-sharp piece had obviously required many hours and a skillful, patient hand.

"Thank you, brother. Your talent is great and your gift will be highly prized."

With that, Nikita hoisted his skin covered craft above his shoulders. His head soon disappeared into the hatch, and another walking baidarka answered the call of the company. Miyacha and Sulkaheya joined the other women and children on the blufftop to watch their loved ones prepare to leave.

The crowd soon clustered into different language groups. Some spoke Kashaya, others Bodegan, and still others Kodiak, while there was a small group of Aleut speakers. Amongst the babble, however,

could be heard many common terms, such as "Russkii," "kayak," "kamleika," and "Matvei." Yes, they spoke of Matvei, the Kodiak leader who had died on the last hunt, and whose body had been buried in honor here at Ross. He was a brave and skillful hunter, and all who watched their departing loved ones knew that the perils of these long voyages were great.

Suddenly, a thundering "Boom!!" came from within the offshore fog, causing all on the blufftop to jerk in surprise. "Boom!!" came the response from the southwest blockhouse. Then, through the shreds of gray mist, there silently appeared the rigging of the brig "Baikal." Soon at Port Rurniantsev, with cargo and kayaks aboard, the ship would sail southward in search of sea otter - the mainstay of the company's economic base. Miyacha and Sulkaheya would now return to their village, kolommal li, only to come back to the colony when Nikita returned.

From Dr. Goldstein's excavations at the Fort Ross Cemetery, we gained information on burial patterns and funerary items as well as clothing and clothing-related items and textiles. These data have allowed us to duplicate fabrics, designs of coats, jackets, and other clothing, and even the colors of common garment types to be used by our costumed interpreters. These costumes are worn on a daily basis by the interpreters in their historic presentations to visitors and by other staff and volunteers at special events.

Another important discovery from the cemetery excavations was quantities of glass beads. These excavated beads allow us to select other trade beads or duplicates of originals to adorn interpreters accurately. This not only increases authenticity in fine detail, but provides the interpreter with a true sense of connection with the past.

Also unearthed were a creamware bowl and some English porcelain cups and saucers.

Dr. Lightfoot's excavations at the Beach Site (SON-1898/H) and the Native Alaskan Village Site (SON-1897/H), have produced many artifacts and habitation data from which inferences may be

drawn and utilized in the overall interpretive theme and design at Fort Ross State Historic Park. For example, numerous points and foreshafts made from animal bone and walrus ivory, used in the hunting of marine mammals, have been excavated. These discoveries have pointed us toward the particular tool kit and hunting strategies used by the Native Alaskans. Faunal analysis performed by Thomas Wake has given interpreters a comprehensive insight into the consumption patterns and procurement strategies of these Fort Ross residents, most of whom came from Kodiak Island. Park staff members have employed this information not only in acquiring models of authentic craft and hunting gear, but also in presenting to the public a more complete picture of these interesting inhabitants, who made up the majority of the settlement's population. To see the look on a child's face, when he or she sees a demonstration in the use of a throwing board (atlatl) and dart, and to see as the child touches a sea otter pelt, are an interpreter's dreams. One can almost observe the spark of historical inquisitiveness being struck, and the time, energy, and expense of archaeological excavation become worthy investments in our future. Archaeological work provides interpreters with the fuel for the fire of learning.

In this vein, with uncertainty as to the future funding of live interpreters, a proposal has been made to use static exhibits of excavation sites a goal at Fort Ross S.H.P. In an integrated set of trailside stops, a visitor would be allowed a unique opportunity to view archaeological deposits in situ (Figure 1). Along this trail, the visitor would be taken out of the stockade, through the Native Alaskan Village site, down to the beach site, and eventually up through a Native Californian site. A walk on this archaeological trail would allow the public to see beyond the buildings and blockhouses, where so few Fort Ross residents lived, to the bustling community outside the walls, to the "real Ross."

As long ago as 1953, Robert F. Heizer and T.D. McCown noted in a preface to Adan Trenganza's report on Fort Ross archaeology:

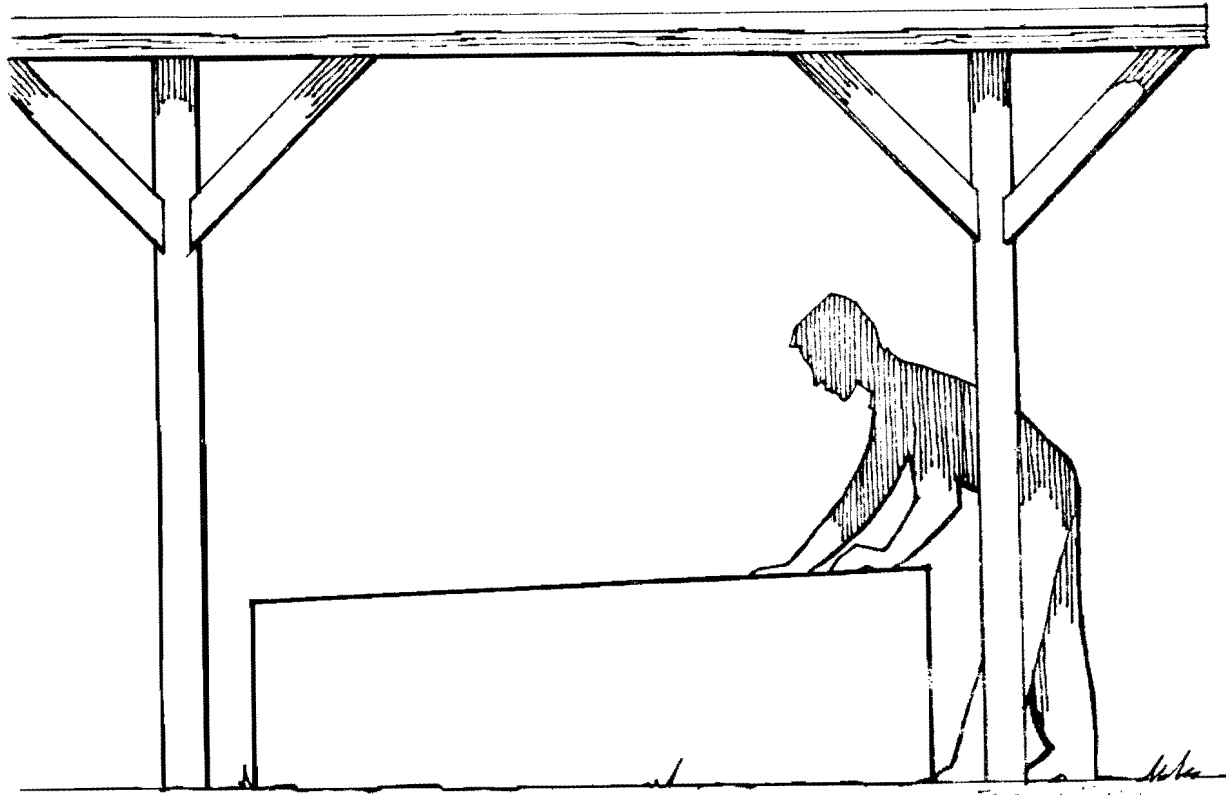


Figure 1. Trailside Viewing Station with Archaeological Deposits In Situ and an Explanatory Panel

The very high spectator interest in excavations of this sort by the public can be attested to by each of us who has taken part in such fieldwork. The sightseer's interest which brings him to such spots as Fort Ross is basically a sense of history (though he may be woefully ignorant of facts) and when he views old foundations, posts or artifacts in situ it is with a sense of awareness and appreciation that here is something old, original, unreconstructed and altogether fascinating. In no small part the archaeological interest can be preserved indefinitely by sheltering some of the better exposures of foundations or other structural features and making them outdoor exhibits which can be adequately explained by signs and diagrams.
[Treganza 1953:i]

The interpretive concepts of these men, conceived 40 years ago may soon come to reality. It is hoped that the interpretive archaeological trail will be constructed, and that through this trail and personal interaction with on-site staff, we can bring history to life through archaeology.

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