

**THE RUSSIAN SETTLEMENT IN
CALIFORNIA KNOWN AS FORT
ROSS; FOUNDED 1812, ABANDONED
1841. WHY THE RUSSIANS CAME
AND WHY THEY LEFT**

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The Russian settlement in California known as Fort Ross; founded 1812, abandoned 1841. Why the Russians came and why they left by R. A. Thompson

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The
Russian Settlement

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California

KNOWN AS FORT ROSS

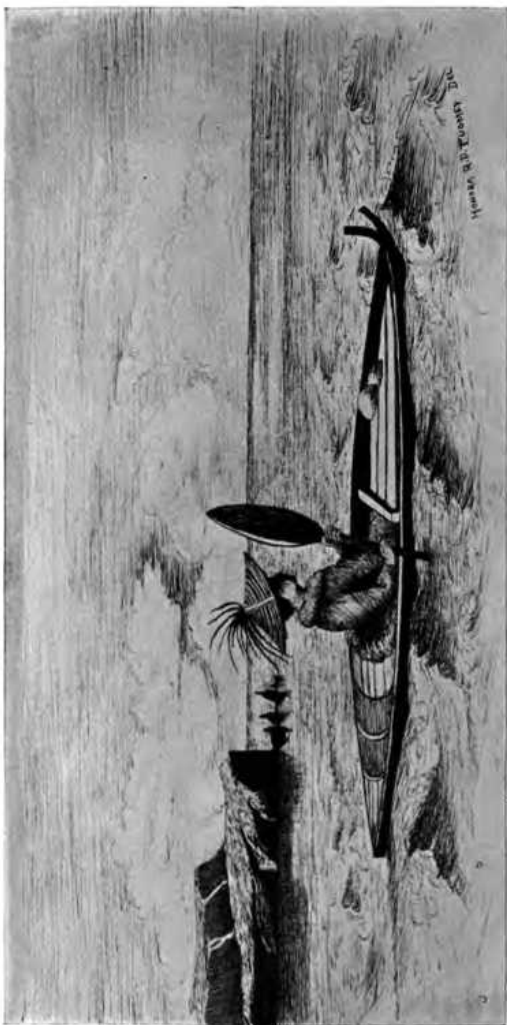
Founded 1812 . . . Abandoned 1841

WHY THE RUSSIANS CAME AND WHY THEY LEFT

By R. A. Thompson

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1898



Kodiak Indian Skin Boat used at Ross.

The Russians in California



CHAPTER I

The story of the rapid conquest of Siberia, beginning with the advance of Yermak, the robber chief, across the Ural mountains in the sixteenth century, ending with the discovery of the northwest coast of America by Admiral Behring of the Russian navy, is one of the most remarkable achievements in the conquest and occupation of a country in the annals of history.

Behring discovered the fur seal as well as the proximity of the Asiatic and American continents. In the course of time the rumors of the discoveries reached the European capitals of London and Madrid. It had a long way to travel overland to St. Petersburg. Once started, the rumors soon reached the sharp ears of the diplomatists and were promptly reported to their home governments.

The result was the fitting out of Captain Cook's expedition for discoveries in that quarter by the English, a like expedition from Mexico by order of the King of Spain.

In the English expedition came the first pioneers of American people to the Pacific coast: John Ledyard, a native of Connecticut, and Captain John Gore, a native of Virginia. The latter, on the death of Captain Cook at the Hawaiian islands, took command as the ranking officer, and returned with the fleet to England.

We omit the complications which arose between England and Spain over their respective claims on the northwest coast of America, the outgrowth of these early voyages, and return to the Russians, with whom we have directly to deal.

The charter of the Russian-American company gave them some extraordinary privileges, which, in fact, included the government of the country, and it soon absorbed all the various independent associations and became supreme on the northwest American coast.

A bold and enterprising adventurer named Shelekof, a man of great executive ability and energy, was mainly instrumental in organ-

izing the Russian-American Fur Company. He selected for the head of the monopoly he had created Alexander Baranoff. Baranoff was a striking type of the strong race from which he sprang. He started life as a clerk in a retail store in Moscow. This offered no field to a spirit so adventurous as his. He went to Siberia in 1780. He was actively engaged in business when Shelekov put him at the head of his company, and he never displayed better judgment than in this selection of an agent. Baranoff was energetic, daring, politic on occasion, and bold as Cæsar when boldness was needed. He could execute the plans of others, and with equal ability could conceive and execute plans of his own. His influence over the Russian was unlimited, and he ruled not only the natives but his more unruly countrymen of the lowest class who were sent out to him. He was a small man, under average in size, with blue eyes, a bald head and sallow complexion. He was diplomatic and could shape words for a flexible meaning, and when he wanted to could make them as direct as a rifle ball aimed point-blank. For instance, he wrote to his company "Send me a priest well-informed, who is a peaceable man, not suspicious and not biggoted." For the rest, he was in the habit of getting on periodical sprees on hot rum, in which he generally involved everybody around his

"castle" before he got through, but they never interfered with his business.

One of the most notable of the events of his life was the building out of American timber and the launching of the first American-built vessel on the northwest coast. It was named the Phoenix by Baranoff and was floated in August, 1794, and afterwards made regular trips between the American and Asiatic coast.

Starting about the same time, the Russians had crossed and occupied Siberia, had crossed Behring sea and occupied the American coast and established communication with Asia by a ship built of American timber, before the English moving on the Atlantic coast had yet more than reached the Mississippi river.

Nothing could better illustrate the push and drive of the people of this mighty nation now pressing, if it has not already attained, the first place among all European and Asiatic powers.

With this much by way of introduction, we will relate in detail the even more daring occupation by order of Baranoff of the territory of California, and it was undoubtedly his intention to hold it against its then owners for all time, and his successors would have done so but for the timely promulgation in 1823 of the Monroe Doctrine which gave notice to all the world that no occupation of American territory

by European powers would be tolerated by the United States.

This principle was finally and forever settled as far as Russia was concerned in its treaty with the United States of April 17, 1824, in which Russia agreed from thenceforth to establish no settlements on the American continent or any adjacent islands south of the parallel of 54.40. This treaty, though the Russian settlement in California was not mentioned, involved its abandonment and put an end to any further Russian encroachments in California.

The Russian American Fur Company had now concentrated all the fur interests of the northwest coast under the direction of Baranoff. They occupied all the Aleutian Islands and made a permanent settlement on the American coast. It was destined to play a large part in the history of California, as we shall see.

CHAPTER II.

The first event which may be considered as leading to the settlement of the Russians at Fort Ross, was the sailing from Sitka on March 8th, 1806, of Chamberlain Resanof, of the Russian-American Fur Company, on the ship Juno (formerly an American vessel) bound for California on a trading voyage. Before Resanof's return to Sitka he seems to have determined to make a settlement somewhere on the California coast where his company

could carry on agriculture, and trade with the Californians. It was deemed unnecessary to ask permission of Spain, as Spanish authority north of San Francisco Bay was not recognized by the Russians; and the Russian government had already authorized the company to extend Russian sovereignty as far south as possible without infringing on the rights of other nations.

Resanof was ambitious. He hoped to eventually acquire for his country all the territory from San Francisco Bay to the Columbia river. The important mission of locating the site for the future settlement was intrusted to Kuskof, who by order of Baranoff sailed on the Kodiak, and after touching at Trinidad, arrived at Bodega Bay (always called by the Russians Port Rumiantsoff) on January 8th, 1809. Here the Kodiak remained at anchor until August. After carefully exploring the surrounding country, some temporary buildings were erected, some otter and beaverskins were procured and friendly relations were established with the Indians.

On August 29th Kuskof sailed for Sitka, and upon his arrival was able to report favorably concerning the country. He had found a fine climate, good tillable lands, plenty of fish and fur-bearing animals and a tolerable harbor. And as the country was entirely unoccupied by European or American settlers, the conditions were favorable for the

colony. So the Czar of Russia was petitioned to open negotiations with Spain with a view of a treaty allowing trade with New Albion, as Northern California was then called. And he was also asked to give the settlement the protection of the Russian government in case of opposition by the Americans. And this protection, it is said, was promised by the Czar; while, as to trading with the Californians, the company were told to make such terms as they could. Upon receiving this encouragement, Kuskof attempted a new expedition to Bodega, but was unsuccessful, for while stopping at Queen Charlotte's island, he was attacked by Indians and was compelled to return to Sitka.

In 1811, Kuskof again sailed for Bodega in the schooner Chirikof and upon his arrival he at once renewed his explorations in the endeavor if possible to find a better place than Bodega at which to establish his headquarters and build his fort. He found a place, sixteen miles by water north of Bodega, called by the Indians Mad-shui-nui where, though there was no land-locked bay, there was excellent anchorage, and good protection from all summer winds; and he found that all other advantages, such as soil, timber, water and pasturage were much better than at Bodega.

The valley of the Slavianka (Russian River) was examined for

fifty miles but no place was found that compared favorably with Mad-shui-mui, so after a thorough investigation of the whole country, Mad-shui-mui was chosen and work was commenced at once. The site selected was a table-land about 100 feet above the ocean and containing something over 1000 acres and was according to Russian observation in latitude $38^{\circ} 33'$ longitude $123^{\circ} 15'$ (our coast pilot puts it now in lat. $38^{\circ} 30'$ long. $123^{\circ} 15'$). The friendship of the native chiefs was secured by making them presents and the Russians claim, and it is probably true, that the country was ceded by the Indians to the Company. There were at this time in the Russian Colony, 95 Russians, including 25 mechanics. There were also about 80 Aleuts with a fleet of 40 bidarkas (skin boats). The Aleuts were sent out to hunt otter along the coast, but with instructions to not enter San Francisco Bay, for it was oest at this time not to offend the Spaniards. The Russians prepared timber for several months and when all was ready the Aleuts were recalled to aid the mechanics, and all went to work on the fort and other necessary buildings. And in a few months a fortified village had arisen on the shore of New Albion. In the fort were mounted at first only twelve cannon, but the number of cannon was increased to about forty in after years. All was completed early in September and

on September 10th, or August 30th of the Russian calendar, the name day of Emperor Alexander, the establishment was formally dedicated with great festivity and named Ross from the root of the name Russia, a word extending far back into antiquity.

As to the exact original meaning of the word Ross there seems to be a difference of opinion, but it is certain that the people of the Volga were formerly called Rus, and the Russians generally were called the people of Ross, and the country is yet called Rossia or Russia.

About this time there was distributed over California a proclamation issued by the Russian American Fur Company and addressed to the people of California. It was a very conciliatory document and was intended to make friends of the Californians, and thus advance the interests of the Russians. But it seems to have done no good, for the Californians were jealous of their own rights and suspicious of foreigners. Thus it was that the Russians, in less than a year's time, found themselves firmly planted in California without have ing met with any resistance from the Indians or Spaniards. The Spanish were cognizant of what was going on at Ross, but were entirely unable to prevent it. But in August, just before the dedication of Ross, Commandant Arguello, of San Francisco, sent Moraga, "a Spanish officer," with seven men, to

Ross to investigate. Moraga returned September 1st and reported that the Russians had built a fort protected by artillery, and apparently intended to remain. Moraga was courteously received by the Russians and was allowed to make a complete inspection of the fort.

Morago was again sent to Ross, in January, 1813, when he conferred with Kuskof about trade. He was made acquainted with the plans of the strangers and returned January 27th. Arguello communicated to the Viceroy the result of Morago's two visits to Ross. There is nothing in the Spanish record to show that the Governor or Commandante of California ever gave the Russians permission to settle in the country or even consented to trade with them without the Viceroy's permission. Meantime, the Viceroy had learned that the Russians had settled on the coast, and in July he wrote to Arriaga instructing him to watch the strangers. He did not fear hostilities from the Russians, but feared that they were not what they seemed. They might be connected with Anglo-American designs upon California. Three weeks later, on receipt of Arriaga's letter, the Viceroy again wrote, enclosing the treaty between Russia and Spain, and instructing the Commandante to notify Kuskof that his occupation of Californian territory was a clear violation of the treaty, and requesting him to immediately remove his establishment.