

RANCHO BODEGA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Rossiya and Rumiantsev Bay

by the late Ruth Burke - 2011

(The following is excerpted from columns by the late Ruth Burke, "From Back When," printed in the Bodega Bay Navigator of January 24, February 7, and February 21, 1991.)

Just as the Spanish explorers had painfully worked their way far up into Alaskan waters seeking out the wealth of the country and endeavoring to lay the foundation of a so-called "just" claim for it, so now the Russian Bear, gaunt from hunger, came prowling out of the frozen north. Russia was seeking a milder climate and more fertile fields in which to sow her grain and reap the harvests necessary to supply the appetite of her Alaskan colonists with daily bread. Besides the food, there was a rich fur crop to be harvested.

The California seacoast was teeming with otter, one of the most beautiful, valuable, and wanted of furs known in the world. Alaskan waters were becoming depleted of otter, due to intensive hunting by the Russians. Starting with the year 1803, seal and sea otter hunters from the north began to visit California waters. Several Yankee skippers signed fur contracts with Alexander Baranov, Director of the Russian American Company at Sitka in Alaska. The Russians supplied the Aleut hunters with baidarkas (skin boats), plus Russian officers to supervise them. The American skippers carried them to the hunting grounds and back, dividing the spoils upon return. They ranged along the shores of the mainland as far south as Lower California, taking seal and sea otter by the thousands.

The first such contract was arranged by Joseph O'Cain, an experienced Boston merchant and sea captain, who traded on this coast with the Spanish. He knew the Russians in Alaska had the only skilled otter hunters in the world, the Aleuts, with their skin-covered canoes and bone spears. O'Cain went north and made a bargain with Baranov. Other Americans followed. This contract arrangement lasted until 1818 at least. In 1808, Baranov started sending his own men on Russian ships out to hunt also.

The Russians were finding out that living conditions in the north were becoming progressively more unbearable. Supply ships, irregular at best, and sometimes altogether missing, often placed them in desperate circumstances. Fortunately for them, in 1805, a high-ranking government officer, in the person of Chamberlain Nikolai Petrovich Rezanov, arrived at Sitka from an around-the-world tour on behalf of the Czar of Russia. Officially, the Chamberlain's title was Plenipotentiary and Envoy Extraordinary to the Emperor of Japan, but his broad discretionary powers extended to the entire Pacific.

Rezanov's mission to Alaska was to inspect the holdings of the Russian American Company. He found the colonists in a very precarious position, chiefly caused by the lack of foodstuffs. They were unable to produce cereals and fruits in that climate, but had to have them in order to survive the long freezing winters when fish were not available, and to supplement that fare even when it was. Disease was rampant and deaths numerous. Something had to be done if the colony was to survive, and quickly.

Rezanov was a man of action. An American vessel chanced to visit Sitka at this time on a trading expedition, the Juno under Captain John de Wolfe. The Russian quickly made a deal whereby he got not only the cargo but the ship also, and thus averted disaster for a time. Recognizing that the remedy was only a temporary

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one he decided to make a trip to the Spanish settlement that lay some 1500 miles to the south, and endeavor to arrange for regular cargoes of food, mainly grain, to relieve his distressed countrymen.

In the spring of 1806, Rezanov made a voyage to San Francisco in his newly acquired vessel. After long and tactful negotiations with the Spanish authorities, the Mission fathers, who were eager to trade, Rezanov was allowed to load the Juno with supplies and she returned to Sitka. Under general orders previously issued from Madrid, the Russians were not encouraged to repeat their visit, which was disappointing to Rezanov. But while in the San Francisco Bay Area, he had ample opportunity to familiarize himself with conditions in and around the Spanish settlements. He learned that there were no settlements north of the Bay, defenses were practically non-existent, the soil and climate were excellent for farming, and the coastal waters swarmed with fur-bearing animals. As a result of his observations, he resolved to establish a Russian colony somewhere north of San Francisco Bay and immediately laid plans to do so, peaceably if possible.

In 1807, Vasily Tarakanov, one of the Russian officers aboard the American ship Peacock, reported to Alexander Baranov on his return to Sitka, the news that an excellent site for a base harbor had been found at Bodega Bay. It was used by the Peacock, under Captain Oliver Kimball, for a hiding place from the Spanish while hunting otter.

Baranov was desirous of carrying out Rezanov's plans for a settlement in California, so the first independent fur hunting expedition was dispatched from Sitka under the trusted command of Ivan Alexander Kuskov, who was vested with full authority to act for the Russian American Company. Besides fur hunting, his was an exploration trip with colonization in mind. He sailed from Sitka on October 20, 1808, in the ship Kodiak, under Captain Petrov. They left in December and dropped anchor in Bodega Bay on January 8, 1809, thereafter called Rumiantsev Bay by the Russians. On board the Kodiak were 150 Aleut hunters, including twenty women, with their skin boats or baidarkas, and a Russian force of forty men.

Kuskov made friends with the local Indian inhabitants. Temporary buildings were erected for the otter hunters and others. They remained here until August 28 exploring the area and hunting for fur-bearing animals. When they left for Sitka, 2350 otter skins went with them. When Kuskov arrived back at Sitka, he reported to Baranov a good harbor, a fine building site, tillable lands, a mild climate, an abundance of fish and fur-bearing animals and above all, a region unoccupied by any European power.

In early 1811 Baranov again dispatched Kuskov to Bodega Bay, this time in the Chirikov, commanded by Khristofor Benzeman. During his stay at Bodega Bay this time, Kuskov continued to send out his Aleut hunters for furs while he scouted the countryside for a permanent settlement location – one that could be defended more easily than Bodega Bay or Bodega. He returned north on June 20, came back to Bodega Bay in March 1812, went some miles north and began construction of the settlement called Rossiya, later known as Ross or Fort Ross. He had a commission from the Russian American Company to found and govern a colony. He brought twenty-five Russian workers and forty baidarkas of Aleuts with him (two to a boat). On one of his trips he purchased land from the Indians. The purchase price for the land is said to have been three blankets, three hoes, two axes, some beads and three pairs of breeches.

The incident highlights the fact that the Russian of that period had some regard for native ownership and the price, small as it was, represented more value than all the other land grabbers combined even offered. In dealing with the latter, the native generally lost not only his breeches but his shirt also, if and when he had either. In 1817, a formal deed of cession was signed by several local chief, certifying that the Indians were satisfied with the Russian occupation. They came to prefer it over the Spanish.