

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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### **Fort Ross**

We have traveled the Redwood Highway for the past two days and what could be more satisfying? The azaleas are in bloom and wild flowers border the well paved roads. There is much work going on, widening for four lanes, but there is no hardship in evidence to the motorist as we travel north over 101 soon after leaving Sonoma County.

Our first stop was at Fort Ross, a state Historical Monument, administered under direction of the California State Park Commission through the Division of Beaches and Parks, Department of Natural Resources. Here we renewed the friendship of Mr. & Mrs. McKenzie, both of whom are members of the Western Museum Conference and are usually present at all the meetings of this important organization. Mr. McKenzie is the curator-ranger at this historic monument and an excellent job he has accomplished for the edification and pleasure of the public who visit the old fort.

Fort Ross represents the efforts of the Russian-American Co., with headquarters at Sitka, Alaska, to establish during the early 19th Century a base on the California coast for sea otter hunting and the development of agricultural supplies for Alaska. Coming into conflict with the Mexican authorities, and finding their efforts increasingly less successful, the Russians withdrew to Alaska in 1841, on the sale of their California holding to Capt. John Sutter.

We probably saw during our visit the very last of the restoration program as planned by the state. Men were putting the last pickets to the top of the fort's encircling wall of redwood. The block houses at two corners have been completed and the clean-up was taking place all over the working area.

The Russian-American Co., which established Fort Ross in 1812, was a trading company chartered by Catherine the Great, Empress of Russia. Organized to exploit the fur resources of Alaska, its activities resembled in many ways those in Canada of the Hudson's Bay Co. Kodiak became the first Alaskan headquarters, with its founding in 1784, but later, in 1804, Sitka became the center of the Russian-American Company activities. From these centers numerous posts were established to

carry out the company's monopoly in Alaska, until 1867 when the territory was sold to the United States.

We read in the folder issued by the Division of Beaches and Parks, of the Czar's declaration closing the Pacific Coast north of San Francisco to all but Russian ships. This act, plus the presence of Russians at Fort Ross, undoubtedly had an effect in the pronouncement of the Monroe Doctrine in 1823, which stated that European nations could not extend their holdings in the New World.

In addition to the fur trading at Fort Ross, there were carried forward boat building and trading of products to the Spanish and Mexicans for supplies, livestock, tools and lumber.

With the decline of the fur trade, negotiations for the sale of the Russian holdings was carried on with both Gen. Mariano G. Vallejo of Sonoma and Capt. John A. Sutter at Sutter's Fort. The final contract was signed on Dec. 13, 1841. Sutter was to pay a total of \$30,000 for the improvements, equipment and livestock. In 1842, \$5,000 was to be paid in food and supplies; \$10,000 in goods in 1844, with a final payment of \$10,000 in gold in 1845.

In 1874 the land at Fort Ross was acquired by the Call family. The stockade, through the efforts of the Calls, Native Sons of the Golden West, and others, was deeded to the state in 1906. All restoration has been determined by documentary and archaeological research. It is known that during the Russian Period there were nine buildings inside the stockade and some 50 more outside.

The Russian Orthodox Chapel (built about 1828) was restored in 1955-1956. One of the original three bells which hung in the tower, is now in the Museum collection. The Commander's house, largely original, was built in 1812, and now houses the well-arranged and valuable museum exhibit.