

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE VASILI KHLBNIKOV RANCH

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ABSTRACT

Russian California is characterized by an emphasis on otter hunting and a necessary but clandestine trade with Spanish settlements. The colony gave little attention toward agricultural pursuits until fur profits declined and trade competition increased during the Mexican Period. In response, the Russian-American Company established three ranches in an attempt to keep the Ross settlement a productive asset. The Vasili Khlebnikov Ranch was founded in the 1830s, approximately five miles inland from Port Rumyantsev, or Bodega Bay, near the modern town of Bodega Corners. Its establishment represents a bold move into the interior directly toward Mexican settlements and illustrates the convergence of Slavic and Hispanic traditions. The ranch consisted of mostly redwood buildings, but also had the distinction of possessing the only known Russian adobe house in America. At present, the ranch is only understood through archival evidence, but an investigation is being designed to confirm its location and nature.

This discussion concerns the 1830s Vasili Khlebnikov Ranch located on the California coast. The ranch was a main component of the Russian-American Company's effort to establish itself in Alta California in the first half of the last century. It literally represents the furthest extension of Russian settlement, and can be considered the historic border between Slavic and Hispanic frontier cultures. It also represents one of the initial points of sustained contact between Native Californians and colonial empires north of San Francisco. As such, the site can potentially address numerous questions, but exactly where the Vasili Khlebnikov Ranch was located must first be determined. This paper will attempt to address this issue through historical research and present an archaeological design that can test its conclusion.

Historic Russian settlement along the Sonoma coastline has been the subject of ongoing research, especially regarding the largest settlement of Fort Ross (Essig 1933; Fedorova 1973; Tuomey 1926). The cooperative efforts over the last decade between California State

Parks and Recreation and the Archaeological Resource Facility at the University of California at Berkeley has taken us beyond the outdated thinking of Ross as a fort and toward an understanding of the frontier and multi-ethnic qualities of Ross as a community (Lightfoot et al. 1991, 1997; Parkman 1996/7; Watrous and Tomlin 1993). This discussion is intended to supplement that ongoing research with some details regarding one of the outlying features of the Russian settlement.

Russian exploration, settlement, and trade dominated the North Pacific during the 18th century (Barratt 1981). Private entrepreneurs worked their way east seeking out resources and trade opportunities fueled primarily by abundant fur bearing animals. They were so successful that, by the end of the 18th century, Imperial Russia wanted a piece of the action. The two premier Russian companies were combined into a single Imperial enterprise: the Russian-American Company (Dmytryshyn et al. 1989:12-17).

The Company became aware of Bodega Bay during cooperative otter hunting expeditions. They supplied Alaskan Natives to hunt otter, and Boston Traders supplied their ships (Ogden 1941:45). Together they sailed down the west coast and used the bay for safe dockage away from all of the Spanish activity to the south (Ogden 1933:221; Fedorova 1973:135). Then Count Rezanov opened the door of diplomacy and trade with Hispanic Alta California in 1806 (Dmytryshyn et al. 1989:132).

The Russian-American Company colonies in the North Pacific had not paid enough attention to food and were literally starving when Rezanov took the initiative and boldly entered the San Francisco Bay (Gibson 1987:81). He returned with grain, and on the way witnessed for himself the untapped trade and hunting potential along the Sonoma coast. Three years later, in 1809, a Russian-American Company ship returned to Bodega Bay with plans to establish a permanent settlement (Essig 1933:191). Outwardly, the Russians always insisted that their settlement was nothing more than a hunting base, but internal records suggest that trade for grain to continue feeding the colonies was just as important (Fisher 1971:48).

Duflot de Mofras, a French visitor to the Ross community, provided one of the few maps of Russian California (Duflot de Mofras 1841). His map clearly depicts the Russian settlement in relation to recognizable geographic features on the Sonoma and Marin coastline such as Bodega Bay and the mouth of the Russian River. A complex network of facilities is revealed. The Russians used Campbell Cove as their port-of-entry and, according to Duflot de Mofras, called it *Cap Romanzoff* and *Port de la Bodega* (Ibid.). Kuskov, the founder and first manager of the settlement, decided to establish Ross to serve as the capital on a thin terrace, high above the beach, up the coast from the port.

The majority of employees, industry, and the first farm could be found at Ross, but other than a single roadside lookout, the rest of the settlements were established closer to the port on the south side of the Russian River. These included the Kostromitinov Ranch on the south

bank of the Russian River. This farm also served as a ferry crossing and was called the Three Friends Ranch by their Hispanic neighbors to the south (Mathes 1990:208). The Chernykh Ranch appears to be the furthest inland and is named for Yegor Chernykh, a trained agriculturalist who was dispatched to Ross in 1836 (Gibson 1968:51). And finally, at the heart of an elaborate road network, there is the Vasili Khlebnikov Ranch. This ranch was situated closest to the port, north of a prominent waterway labeled the *San Ignacio* or *Avatcha*, and as suggested by the system of roads, served as the gateway between Slavic and Hispanic frontiers. The houses of McIntosh and Dawson, two of the grantees of the Estero Americano Rancho granted in 1839, appear on the map near the Vasili Khlebnikov Ranch.

The Company was slow at establishing their farms, but as the otter population declined below a profitable level and trade became less reliable due to increasing hostilities between Spain and Mexico, they reconsidered alternative uses for the California settlement (Fisher 1971:56). The Vasili Khlebnikov Ranch was the first of the three to get off the ground. Establishing a summer house and warehouse with ten or twelve Russians and a few California natives to tend livestock and cultivate enough wheat, corn, hemp, beets, cabbage, and cucumbers to feed all the North Pacific colonies was first envisioned by Kyrill Khlebnikov (1976:126). He pictured the meadows inland from Bodega Bay as the perfect location. Then, in 1824, the main office instructed Carl Schmidt, the man then serving as manager of Ross, to carry out Khlebnikov's recommendations. They also promised to send "two families of Creoles_as farmers and fully equipped" (Fisher 1971:88).

By 1839 there were 12 Russians, 3 Creoles, 2 Aleuts from Alaska originally brought down to hunt otter, and 18 Native Californians that were probably Bodega Miwok but may have been Pomo, all residing at the Khlebnikov Ranch (Alekseyev 1977:34). Of these 35 people, one was the designated cook and one of the Aleuts was an archer who "hunted wild goats and deer to feed the Indians" (Ibid.). This account suggests that the Native Californian inhabitants were no longer providing for themselves through traditional

means, but were at work in the fields for the Russians instead.

The main house at the Vasili Khlebnikov Ranch was an adobe that measured approximately 21 by 15 feet (Dufлот de Mofras 1937:253). It had three chambers, a wood shingled roof, its own kitchen, a sundial, and a fenced yard (Ibid.). This unique structure was the only adobe building built by, or at least occupied by, Russian colonists. They did not typically build in adobe as can be expected from a more northern climate culture. They were wood workers and their buildings were typically of log construction (Hoagland 1993:27; Senkevitch 1987:154). The decision to build the main house out of adobe brick instead of wood illustrates the convergence of the Hispanic and Slavic worlds. But where did they learn how to do it? Did they imitate the building traditions of their Hispanic neighbors? Perhaps their neighbors instructed them on adobe tradition. Or were some of the Native Californians at the ranch familiar with how to make adobe and passed this knowledge on to the Russians? Again, to begin answering these questions the site of the Vasili Khlebnikov Ranch must first be located.

The remaining buildings at the ranch were made of wood and included a barracks with three rooms and a wood planked roof (DuFour 1933:258). There was a large, two-story warehouse. There was a second kitchen along with a bakery and a forge all housed in a single building. There was the traditional Russian steam bath, or sauna, typically made of wood. There were two buildings for housing "Indians," although the Bodega Miwok, who referred to themselves as the Olamentke (Kostromitonov 1974:7), had their village of Sutuwene nearby (Barrett 1908:304). This village had at least four house pits which would have been ample room for the 18 natives listed. The relationship between the villagers and the ranchers is another important research question, although well beyond the scope of this paper.

There was a building for curing tobacco confirming that this was one of the crops at the ranch (DuFour 1933:258). There was also a huge threshing floor measuring over 70 feet in diameter where horses would thresh the wheat. Once the

wheat was threshed, it was ground at the ranch in the mill powered either by animal or manually (Ibid.). The animals were kept in a wooden corral, and other than the wheat and tobacco already mentioned, the ranch grew beans, corn and also had a large vegetable garden (Dufлот de Mofras 1937:253). In fact, all of the "attractively ornamented" buildings were surrounded by gardens (Ibid:7).

Social events were also held at the Vasili Khlebnikov Ranch. In August of 1841, for example, Helene de Rotchev, the wife of the then manager Alexander Rotchev, celebrated her birthday in the pleasant meadows surrounding the ranch (Dufлот de Mofras 1937:13). About 30 men and women who rode in on horseback from the nearby settlement of Sonoma joined in the celebration. They danced and sang for two nights and three days mixing Russian song and Spanish guitar (Ibid.). The scene must have been quite a sight for the Native Alaskans and the neighboring Olamentke.

Even though members of these two frontier settlements would get together for a party now and then, the official policy of the Mexican government was that the Russians were squatters (DuFour 1933:264). In fact, the Californios encouraged settlement as close to the Russians as possible by awarding land grants to just about anybody who would become a Mexican citizen (Trussell 1960:28). The Estero Americano Rancho was just such a land grant. It was awarded to Ed McIntosh from Scotland, James Dawson from Ireland, and James Black from England in 1839, but the three men had been encouraged to move there as early as 1836 (Ibid:29). They named the grant after the estuary south of the Vasili Khlebnikov Ranch that Dufлот de Mofras mistakenly labeled *San Ignacio* on his ca. 1841 map.

The three immigrants submitted crude maps, or diseños, with their grant application that clearly depicted their homes north of the Estero Americano in a valley they called Canada de Mais (State of California n.d.). A west-flowing creek, later renamed Salmon Creek, can be seen on one of these diseños flowing west past two structures labeled "casas de los Rusos," or houses of the

Russians. South of those houses are fields labeled "Siembras de los Rusos," or fields of the Russians. Both the diseño and the map by Duffot de Mofras are reminders that the Russian agriculturists were by no means the only foreigners to California. This evidence also implies that the Vasili Khlebnikov Ranch was established in the Salmon Creek valley by the mid 1830s.

After 30 years of hunting otter, trading with the Spanish, ranching and farming, ship and brick making, and mixing with indigenous groups, the Russian-American Company put the entire California colony up for sale. They eventually closed a deal with Captain John Sutter of Sacramento, and left Alta California by 1842 (DuFour 1933:274; Simpson 1930:36). Sutter removed livestock and other merchandise from the settlements, but it was agreed that the structures at the Vasili Khlebnikov Ranch would be left alone in case he defaulted payment (DuFour 1933:271; Bidwell 1987:169).

Although numerous people petitioned the young Mexican government for the land and ranches left vacant by the Russians, it was ultimately awarded to Captain Stephen Smith and named the Bodega Rancho (Trussell 1960:25). Smith was a retired sea captain and Boston trader who decided to settle down in Alta California with his young Peruvian wife and in-laws. He parked his ship in his new harbor and unloaded the makings for the first steam sawmill in California (Ibid:40). The abandoned buildings, including the adobe, provided readily available homes and storehouses for the new occupants (Fowler and Fowler 1916:160).

A plan of the land claimed by Stephen Smith was prepared to submit with his petition that depicts a cluster of three buildings in relation to Bodega Bay, the Estero Americano, and the houses of McIntosh and Dawson (California State Library ca. 1844). The cluster sits on the border between Smith's Bodega Rancho claim and the Estero Americano Rancho, and are labeled "Rancho Basil" (Ibid.). Rancho Basil is the Spanish way of saying the Vasili Khlebnikov Ranch, and at this point it is clear that it is located along Salmon Creek at the boundary between the Bodega and Estero Americano land grants.

Smith's Bodega Ranch headquarters was a 70 x 30 foot, two-story adobe that some believe was originally built by the Russians (Tuomey 1926:325). Was finding the Russian adobe really that easy? Not exactly. After Smith had been living in abandoned Russian buildings for about five years, General William T. Sherman visited him as he toured the young Republic. Sherman noted in 1848 that Smith "employed a number of absolutely naked Indians in making adobes" (Sherman 1945:36). If Smith already lived in the abandoned Russian adobe, why was he investing in adobe bricks? Then, in 1851, Steven Fowler arrived in Bodega and was hired by Smith to do the final carpentry work on his newly built adobe that measured 70 x 27 feet (Fowler and Fowler 1916:193). The Bodega Ranch headquarters appears to have been built during Smith's tenure and not the Russians.

The Bodega Rancho was surveyed again in 1857 as part of the land grant confirmations carried out by the United States. The resulting plat again depicts the boundary line between the Bodega and Estero Americano land grants crossing Salmon Creek and through a cluster of buildings, including the "Bodega Ranch House," an "old mill site," a "small house," and a "tannery" (General Land Office 1857). This cluster of buildings certainly appears to be where the "Rancho Basil" was plotted twenty years earlier, and the structures even span both sides of the grant boundary as they had then.

An aerial photograph provides a modern birds-eye view of the same area taken 123 years later. The boundary between the Bodega and Estero Americano land grants remains etched into the landscape even though they have been parceled down. Above Salmon Creek, bracketed by a line of trees, the large ruin of Smith's adobe ranch house can still be seen clearly. A fire burned away all of the wood in the 1880s, and the seasons have melted the walls down to about a meter in height, but the remains match both the size described by Fowler and the location deduced from several historic maps (Hendry and Bowman:1940:276).

There is strong evidence that the Vasili Khlebnikov Ranch was established on the

boundary between the Bodega and Estero Americano Ranchos north of Salmon Creek. There is also good evidence that the Russians built and abandoned a small adobe building as the main house for the ranch. Historic journals indicate that Smith moved into the abandoned Russian buildings, but that he also invested in adobe bricks and carpentry for a ranch house that was three times the size of the one that the Russians built. How can Smith's 70 x 30 foot adobe also be the Russian's 21 by 15 foot adobe?

Today, the adobe ruin appears as a rectangular earthen berm, about one meter in height, and covered in myrtle. Taken from the high points of the berm, or adobe melt, the ruin measures approximately 70 x 31 feet in plan. The base of the berm, bell shaped in cross-section, is roughly eight to twelve feet thick. On the north end of the exterior the berm bulges out several more feet as if the truncated remains of a hearth or steps existed there. There are two important observations of the interior portion of the ruin. The first is a single interior stone foundation that is three feet wide, not covered by adobe melt, and flush with the ground surface. The stones are visible and articulated. It appears to span the width of the southern third of the adobe melt, approximately 21 feet north of the southern wall, to form a small rectangle measuring 31 x 21 feet with three walls of adobe melt and a fourth wall without. The other observation is a slight rise on the opposite side of the interior that at first appears to be another foundation. Closer inspection, however, reveals that the rocks, cobbles, and red brick in that portion of the ruin are randomly situated and potentially not in primary context.

It is possible that the exposed interior foundation was one of the original exterior adobe wall foundations of the abandoned Russian adobe that was razed when Smith enlarged his home. The implication being that Smith enlarged the Russian adobe instead of building one entirely from scratch. The sizes are still five to ten feet larger than historical accounts, but with the adobe melt obscuring the foundations, actual dimensions are difficult to obtain, not to mention that the historical accounts may only have been estimations.

Smith and his family may have lived in the small, abandoned Russian adobe for about five years at which point they upgraded following the initial success of his operation. His land grant was confirmed and his enterprise was growing. He began to have adobe bricks made in 1848, and by 1851 he had extended the foundation and built up three new walls. The internal wall was removed in the process, but the foundation remains as a vestige of the original Russian building. Targeted excavations of the ruin can test this conclusion regarding the location of the Vasili Khlebnikov Ranch.

Test implications include exposure of a cold joint where Smith's addition foundation and adobe bricks abut the corner of the original structure. The exposed foundation should be articulated with the southern third of the long, exterior foundation that is presently covered by adobe melt. There should also be no red brick within the assumed original foundation. Larger corner stones are expected where the interior foundation intersects the exterior foundation under the melt that would be out of place if there was never a corner there. The internal anomaly in the northern portion of the ruin will differ substantially in composition and form from the suspected abandoned foundation. If none of these predictions hold true, then it is likely that the Smith Ranch house does not have any associations with the Vasili Khlebnikov Ranch adobe, and the Russian ranch has yet to be found.

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