

## NEW THOUGHTS ON THE KOSTROMITINOV RANCH, SONOMA COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

TSIM D. SCHNEIDER

*Established in 1833, Kostromitinov Ranch was an outlying farming operation intended to supply Colony Ross and to support Russian-American Company (RAC) outposts along the Pacific Rim. Although its precise location is unknown and few ethnohistoric documents mention the operation, Kostromitinov Ranch continues to hold serious potential for culture-contact research. This paper discusses adjunct reconnaissance and survey carried out near Willow Creek during the 2004 summer field school at Fort Ross, archival and map research pertaining to Kostromitinov Ranch, and the possibilities for investigating colonial interactions on a multi-sided and fluid frontier.*

Colony Ross, or Fort Ross as it is known today, was a mercantilist operation and outpost for the Russian-American Company (RAC) from 1812 until 1841. The Ross Colony included the administrative center of Ross, Port Rumianstev at Bodega Harbor, a hunting *artel* located on the Farralon Islands, and, later, at least three farming or ranching operations located south of Ross (Lightfoot 2005:121). As the distant cornerstone of a once-extensive commercial enterprise that profited from the lucrative trade in sea-otter pelts, ethnic Russians comprised only a small portion—14.6 percent and 13.7 percent in 1820 and 1821, respectively—of the population at Ross and at other outposts along the Pacific Coast (Istomin 1992). Creoles, Native Alaskans, Native Hawaiians, and Native Californians who lived and labored at Colony Ross outnumbered RAC administrators. Clearly defined ethnic neighborhoods and an equally diverse range of inter-ethnic households emerged from this amalgamation of cultural backgrounds (Lightfoot 2005; Lightfoot et al. 1991, 1993).

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Native Americans comprised the majority of the population at Colony Ross, in part because some, like the Aleuts, were recruited by the RAC to hunt sea otter and partly because many Native Californians desired to escape the Spanish to the south and to benefit from a less-onerous colonial presence (Tikhmenev 1978:140). Subsequently, Native Alaskans and Native Californians filled many of the jobs and duties attendant with the mercantilist operation, including unskilled labor, sea-mammal hunting, and craft occupations, in addition to responsibilities to their own social networks (Lightfoot et al. 1991). Native Californians in particular filled the lowest rank in the socio-economic hierarchy at Colony Ross, working primarily in the orchards and fields surrounding the Ross stockade.

As the RAC could never recruit enough people to work in the remote areas of the world and for low wages, it depended upon native labor for its survival (Lightfoot et al. 1991:14). Lowell Bean and Dorothea Theodoratus (1978) suggested that approximately one hundred local Kashaya Pomo were employed as agricultural laborers at Ross, while Petr Tikhmenev (1978:232) argues, “without the help of the

native living around the Ross settlement it would have been impossible to harvest the crops because of a shortage of labor.” A deliberate commercial strategy of the RAC thus involved recruitment of local natives. They could be paid less, required less upkeep, they were familiar with extracting local resources such as sea otters, and they had knowledge of local plants and animals that could supplement strained colonial food resources.

With the decline of sea-otter populations as early as 1817 (Gibson 1969; Lightfoot et al. 1991:18), Colony Ross focused its energy on shipbuilding and agriculture as supplementary sources of income to lessen mounting fiscal shortcomings (Allan 2001; Lightfoot et al. 1991). However, the shipbuilding industry at Ross ceased in 1824, most likely due to the poor quality of local wood used for the ships, and because of the amount of labor required (Lightfoot et al. 1991:17). Conversely, agricultural fields, including small plots on the slopes of the nearby hills, flourished and incorporated most of the arable land in the Ross vicinity by 1826 (Tikhmenev 1978:226).

Although the export of wheat and other grains supported the entire Russian-American enterprise (Tikhmenev 1978), fog and vermin destroyed crops for several years on end and continually dashed the hopes of the Ross settlement<sup>1</sup> (Essig et al. 1933:70; Tikhmenev 1978:224). To alleviate the colony’s financial difficulties and to supply the company’s other outposts, three ranches were established south of Ross, where a more temperate climate favored agricultural productivity. In 1833 Kostromitinov Ranch was established near the confluence of the Russian River and Willow Creek. Khlebnikov Ranch and Chernykh Ranch were established in subsequent years. Of the three ranches, only Khlebnikov Ranch has been relocated (Selverston 2000a, 2000b).

### MAPS AND ARCHIVAL RESEARCH

Research for this project thus far can be divided into two parts. The first part consisted of library and map research, while the second part included preliminary reconnaissance and survey of Sonoma Coast State Park property at Willow Creek. Each part ideally will allow me to narrow the search area for re-locating the Kostromitinov Ranch. In

terms of preliminary archival research at the University of California, I have at least two non-archaeological data sets to work with. The first compilation of evidence comes from ethno-historic and travel narratives that were recorded in the area between Bodega Bay and Colony Ross during the period of time in which the ranch was presumably operational, and during the period of time following the ranch's sale to John Sutter in 1841.

As a mercantilist operation at the crossroads of the Spanish (later, Mexican), Russian, and English territories, Colony Ross received countless visits from dignitaries, RAC administrators, other colonial officials, artists, scientists, and naturalists, who left behind an equally impressive number of diary entries, descriptions, official reports, and illustrations. However, few documents mention the trip from Bodega to Ross. From Bodega Bay, visitors to the Russian colony could take roads directly north to Ross or travel inland to the Khlebnikov and Chernykh ranches (Dufлот de Mofras 1841). G.M. Waseurtz af Sandels, a Swedish traveler in northern California in 1842 and 1843, noted that:

All these plains and slopes had formerly been under cultivation by the Russians, and fences and farm buildings were yet standing in many places. They had been built substantially of logs and placed, generally, on some good and dry eminence. [Sandels 1945:80 (1842-1843)]

As Kostromitinov Ranch was located on the road to Ross, it often served as a traveler's way station bearing the name of "Halfway House" (Gibson 1976:118 quoted in Stewart 1986:9). Hubert Bancroft (1886[iii]:63 quoted in Stewart 1986:9) noted that one of the structures at the ranch served as a guest house, while the charming hospitality of these accommodations also earned it the name "Three Friends Ranch" (Selverston 2000a:90). Generally, I am able to estimate the kinds of architectural features and the spatial arrangements of these structures based on research at other RAC colonies with extant architecture, and based on the structures and sundry items listed in the Final Bill of Sale for Colony Ross (Essig et al. 1933). The kinds of buildings—a barracks, a kitchen, a bathhouse, and Indian houses—closely resemble other RAC outposts, such as Khlebnikov Ranch (Selverston 2000), Three Saints Harbor (Crowell 1997), Sitka (Blee 1985), the Kolmakovskiy Redoubt (Oswalt 1980), and Kurilorossiiia (Shubin 1990, 1994). Furthermore, the spatial organization of company buildings and native American settlement areas, or "neighborhoods" (Lightfoot et al. 1991), along the Pacific Coast are consonant (Blee 1985; Crowell 1997; Lightfoot et al. 1991; Oswalt 1980; Shubin 1994), illuminating broader trends in cultural-contact research, specifically the maintenance of traditional Native Californian social practices through the negotiation of colonial places within a fluid and multi-sided frontier.

Historic maps provide further insight into the possible location of Kostromitinov Ranch by documenting long-term changes in environment and land use in the Russian River and Willow Creek area. Archived maps by Eugene Dufлот de Mofras (1841 and 1844) reveal the network of colonial roads that criss-crossed the north San Francisco Bay area. Both maps reveal the location of the Kostromitinov Ranch at the conspicuous last turn in the Russian River before it reaches the Pacific Ocean. This location corresponds to a description by G.M. Waseurtz af Sandels (1945:80 [1842-1843]), who noted a farm building

located high on a bluff overlooking the Russian River. Unfortunately, this would place the ranch today in the proximity of Bridgehaven's paved RV Park.

Maps by A.B. Bowers (1860, 1867) and T.H. Thompson (1877) show the locations of historic ranches established following the creation of the Bodega Rancho. Knowles Ranch (or Knowles Mill), established in 1858, was believed to be constructed on top of the remnants of Kostromitinov Ranch (Stewart 1986). Subsequent features on Kowles Ranch include the Ocean District School, the "ruins"—also known as CA-Son-1515H—that appear on current USGS topographic maps and supposedly rest on top of the remains of the school, and, currently, a maintenance yard for the Department of Parks and Recreation (Stewart 1986:32). Each mill or house appearing on these maps provides further lines of inquiry that may or may not help establish a concrete location for the ranch. Haase (1952) and Stewart (1986) also discuss the presence of railroads in the Willow Creek area used to connect various timber operations post-1848 with the establishment of Duncan's Mills. Duncan's Railroad shown on Bower's 1860 map appears to follow Russian roads mapped in 1841 by Dufлот de Mofras, while L.E. Ricksecker (1897) mapped the route of the Willow Creek branch of the Northern Pacific Railroad circa 1897 which supposedly passed by the Ocean District School (Haase 1952:59).

## RECONNAISSANCE AT WILLOW CREEK

The second part of my preliminary research included reconnaissance of the Willow Creek Unit of Sonoma Coast State Beach. Previous archaeological research in the area has been mostly limited to survey. Stewart (1986:1) conducted a systematic survey of the Willow Creek Unit in 1986, locating two prehistoric archaeological sites (CA-Son-1513 and CA-Son-1514), one historic-period archaeological site (CA-Son-1515H), and one site, near San Quentin Camp (now Pomo Environmental Campground), with historic and prehistoric components (CA-Son-1512/H). The previous year, Breck Parkman directed a "systematic, mechanical soil-ripping program" near San Quentin Camp (CA-Son-1512/H) (Stewart 1986:29). Grading of several transects by Parkman revealed glass, a ceramic plate fragment dating 1891 to 1925, a ceramic beer-bottle stopper with an 1893 patent, brick, window glass, milled boards, as well as prehistoric lithic artifacts (Stewart 1986:28-29). The artifacts included in this assemblage offered compelling evidence of an historic-period structure in the area.

In the fall of 1997, Dr. Kent Lightfoot, in collaboration with the California Department of Parks and Recreation, supervised reconnaissance, surface pedestrian survey, and geophysical survey in the Willow Creek Unit. Students enrolled in Lightfoot's archaeological field methods course conducted archival research, geophysical prospection, and surface pedestrian surveys in order to assess possible locations of the Kostromitinov Ranch. The remains of the ranch were not located; however, crews did find several historic road cuts, a rock wall, and a platform (Frederickson 1997).

Reconnaissance of the Willow Creek Unit in the summer of 2004 was conducted as a component of the UC Berkeley field school at Fort

Ross State Historic Park. Four areas of the Willow Creek Unit were reconnoitered: 1) San Quentin gulch and Pomo Environmental Campground, 2) the Willow Creek bed and creek walls, 3) an area north and south of the confluence of Willow Creek and a smaller tributary, and 4) an area closer to the Russian River and the Willow Creek Environmental Campground. Reconnaissance within San Quentin Gulch included an informal examination of readily visible historic-era components, including sawn and broken tree stumps, some with springboard notches that reflect timber practices of the late nineteenth century (Stewart 1986), the remains of heavy beams used as a bridge to cross San Quentin Creek, and a rock berm with two parallel logs embedded at the source of the creek, which appear to have been part of a sluice.

Survey within the Willow Creek bed was conducted to avoid heavy thickets of poison oak and to locate structures or chutes possibly used to transport dry goods from the ranch to a nearby water source (see Essig et al. 1933). Heavy vegetation along most of the creek prevented inspection of side walls and stratigraphy. No artifacts or architectural features were discovered.

Transects in an area north and west of the confluence of Willow Creek and a smaller stream located one road cut, several snakes, and no artifacts. Inspection in this area was cut short by automatic gunfire from a close but unknown source that was later attributed to the neighboring State Park Rifle Range.

Reconnaissance of an open field near the Willow Creek campground was unsuccessful at locating evidence of historic-period occupation or land use. Overall, the success of reconnaissance can be measured in the number of areas ruled out as possible locations for structures related to the Kostromitinov Ranch.

### CONCLUSION

Future survey hopefully will entail the use of geophysical instruments coupled with systematic test augers to obtain vertical and horizontal control of areas within the Willow Creek Unit and, if possible, closer to the Russian River. The Kostromitinov Ranch continues to hold serious research potential for understanding social dynamics at Colony Ross and, more broadly, in colonial contexts. A robust body of ethno-historic documents, maps, archaeological information, and possibly even Native Californian oral traditions, offers avenues for pinpointing the location of Kostromitinov Ranch, while also suggesting the ranch's position between multiple cultural and colonial borders represented a meeting ground, or "halfway house," for the multiple historical trajectories of local peoples.

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### (Footnotes)

*1 - Annual agricultural export changed dramatically from 2,500 puds (90,000 lbs or 41,000 kg) of grain in 1826 to on average 800 puds (28,800 lbs or 13,120 kg) between 1826 and 1833 (Tikhmenev 1978:224).*

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