California State Parks

Video Transcript

Beyond the Walls of Fort Ross State Historic Park

I'd like to welcome you to Fort Ross State Park. Like the facets on this tiny trade bead, Fort Ross has many sides. We're going to examine some of those facets of this park and take a look at them in more detail. As you can see in this exhibit case, some of the artifacts that have been recovered here over the years by archaeologists working in an excavation in various locations, you can see that there is a combination of cultures that have come together here—from obsidian projectile points, tools that the Kashaya who lived here for thousands of years produced, to slate objects that were used by the Alaskan people who were brought here by the Russians to hunt sea otters, to bone dart points used to hunt sea otters, to nails and musket balls that were brought as part of the defenses of Fort Ross, to more modern technology that was employed by Russians to make their survival here. You can see examples here of objects that were a part of the story of the Russians at Fort Ross. So, as you can see, archaeologists have excavated these objects from the soil surrounding Fort Ross, and it's enabled the story to emerge about what the people were like who were here.

As you can see, these abalone shells are exhibited in here as an example of the use of marine resources by native people. Abalone were a source of food. They were also a source of raw material for various ceremonial figures. Pieces of shell were fashioned into dangles that hung from facemasks in various Kashaya regalia.

No story about Fort Ross could be told without a discussion about why the Russians came to California, and it was certainly in search of the luxurious skins of sea otters, which were numerous along the California coastline. The pelts were of great value to the Chinese, and Russians brought Alaskans to California who were adept at hunting sea otters, and in a short time, in ten to fifteen years, sea otters became very rare and scarce along the California coast, and today have only just started to repopulate the coastline of California.

In 1806 a Russian sailor named Rezanov explored the coast of California, went by this area here at Fort Ross and farther south, and made note of who occupied the land in this frontier. He noted that the Spanish were in Bodega Bay and in San Francisco and in Monterey, but he noticed that from San Francisco north along this part of the coast there were plentiful sea otters. All over the place were sea otters, and other marine mammals—whales and harbor seals and sea lions. He also noticed that in this area it was uninhabited except for the native people, which turned out to be known as the Kashaya. He also found this north part of Fort Ross Cove to have sufficient depth to be able to anchor fairly large sailing vessels. It also noted that the beach just below us here was a good point for which to traverse from a marine environment to the land. Further, it was noted by Rezanov that redwoods grew along the slopes of this coastal set of hills, and that those redwoods could provide wood to build a settlement in the north coast of California, or New Albion as it was also known.

About twenty miles to the south of what's now Fort Ross was the spot that the Russians first chose to build a small warehouse inside of Bodega Bay in a place called Campbell Cove. They built a small settlement first there in 1812. But they soon found that this small port that they had chosen was not as suitable as the current location that they chose, Fort Ross, due to the fact that it is very foggy and is unpredictable. It's hard to navigate ships in and out of the mouth of Bodega Bay in the fog and the shifting sands of the bay. It made it difficult. There were also a lack of materials for which to build any kind of a defensive settlement. The site where we currently are was chosen for those reasons. Fort Ross did offer redwoods. It offered fresh water from the small stream. It offered a relatively easy way of getting from ship to shore. It also offered a force of labor in the native people who were here. Of course the Russians were not sure how friendly the Kashaya people would be, and so they were prepared to deal with hostilities should any occur. They had learned in Alaska in 1802 that the Klinket people were very resistant to Russian settlement, and so they were not sure what they were going to meet at Fort Ross with the native people here.

The Russians had an arrangement of workers that they had at Settlement Ross. This area between us and the fort, out in essentially to the west of the fort, is where the native Alaskan community would live. In this area small circular homes, semi-subterranean, with conical driftwood roofs were constructed and have been excavated in the past by archaeologists from U.C. Berkeley to give us an idea of the kinds of cultural objects that they used in their lives. And we have seen sea otter hunting darts, various butchered bones of terrestrial mammals, we've seen beads and other iron objects recovered from these sites. The Alaskans lived in this site so that they had access to baidarkas. They're seal-skinned kayaks, which were stored in the cove below the fort so that they were able to go out and hunt otters and other marine mammals from this spot.

The building to the right of the Russian-American Company flag is known as the Commandant's House. The last manager of the Russian-American Company, Alexandra Rotchev lived in that house. It is unique in that it is the only surviving original structure constructed at Fort Ross by the Russians. It's fairly well preserved. Rotchev and his wife, Elena, enjoyed the twilight of the occupation of this settlement in the Rotchev house. They were known to enjoy Mozart and fine wine. Their children were raised here and must have had a sense that the settlement was at its apex and in its completion.

The gate, which is also known as a sally port, was the beginning of the road that left Ross to go south to the Russian settlement in Bodega Bay. The road actually began here and led down into the cove and south along the coast and took about eight or so hours to travel by horseback or even by baidarka by sea. In front of the gate is a well, and actually a well was very important to have inside a walled compound to provide water in case there was ever a siege or an inability to go outside the stockade wall to get water. So it was very important to have a well, and the Russians were fortunate to have about a 36-foot deep hole in the middle of the fort that contained water.

In the south corner of the stockade is the eight-sided blockhouse, and I mean eight-sided because just opposite it is a seven-sided structure. The blockhouse was the place where the defense of the fort could actively be mounted. Inside the blockhouse are several cannons, which cover the field of fire to the north, to the south, to the east, to protect the walls of the

stockade from being scaled by anyone who might try to invade the settlement. We know that this form of deterrence may have actually been successful because no one ever attempted to evict the Russians physically from this site.

In the east corner of the settlement is what's known as the chapel, probably built about 1824. It represents the Russian Orthodox religion that was held by the settlers who were here at Ross. Both Alaskan natives, called Aleuts, and Russians were of the Orthodox faith. A priest was supposed to have been assigned to Ross on a permanent basis but none ever arrived. However, there was a priest named Veniaminov, who became a very famous canonized priest in Russia, who came in the 1830s and performed marriages and burial ceremonies at Ross. The building was designed with two towers. The most eastern tower on the right opens to the interior of the structure and allows for very nice acoustics inside. The left tower, which is hexagonal, was where a priest might reside if he had been assigned to Settlement Ross. The upper portion of the tower has a small window that opens to allow light into its interior.

Ivan Kuskov, the first manager of the Russian-American Company, resided in this residence. This two-story structure, the upper floors being the residential part, the lower floors on the right would contain the armory where the muskets and black powder would be stored, and on the left agricultural implements would be kept for use.

The seven-sided blockhouse was mounted in the highest and most northwestern portion of the settlement. It was similar in use to the eight-sided blockhouse—contained weapons and canons to protect the fort from an attack from that side of the settlement.

Right now we're standing on an escarpment. It's a ridge that's built by pressure and by the collision of these two tectonic plates, and this particular ridge follows along the fault to the northwest just adjacent to the actual trench of the fault, but it's also a place where Russians planted fruit trees to supplement foods that were being produced at Ross, grains and meat that was being shipped up to their colonies in Alaska—in Sitka and on Kodiak Island. These fruit trees that were planted here—pears, five different types of apples, bitter cherries, bergamots, peaches—were quite successful and endure even to this time. Several of these trees have been restored, that is cuttings taken from the mother trees grafted on to root stock and then replanted around the original mother trees in an effort to try to preserve the types of apple or fruit tree, whatever it happens to be, for the long run.

Now in a place like this we have this escarpment that is continuing on from where our last location was. We're a little bit farther north, only this time we're standing on the mound of this escarpment, but there's also some vegetation that's grown on this escarpment in the form of very large and very old *Sequoia sempervirens*. These are redwoods—coastal redwoods. The thing to notice at this place is you look up the trunks of the tree you start to see some deformities—broken limbs and some cracks—and you start to realize the enormity of the ground movement that must have occurred here over time during past earthquakes, such as in 1906 when this last ruptured. But if you look into the tops of these trees along this little segment of the fault here on top of this escarpment, you can see some incredibly vivid examples of what can happen to trees and the story that they can tell us about the geologic past.

In April of 1908, a triple expansion steam schooner was making its way from San Francisco to

Eureka, carrying passengers, about 80 of them, on board. He was hugging the coast, as they say, as he was heading north. He was in close to shore, in other words, because passengers were somewhat uncomfortable from being rocked back and forth by the strong northwest winds that were blowing that day. Somewhere south of Fort Ross, a couple of miles, there's a submerged reef, which the *Pomona* struck, somewhat *Titanic*-like, tearing a hole in the side of the hull of the *Pomona*.

The Captain knew about the sandy beach below us here in Fort Ross Cove and intended on driving the *Pomona* up on the beach, preventing it from sinking. However, for some reason he overshot Fort Ross Cove and struck another rock, which is submerged, at this point today, just beyond the surface of the water, and impaled the bow of the *Pomona* upon this wash rock in Fort Ross Cove. The ship was a total wreck. The passengers were rescued by Mr. Call, who was a rancher who lived on the site here. Mr. Call went out in several small boats and was able to remove all the passengers, without injury, from the *Pomona*. The ship, however, was not so fortunate. It sank stern first and was soon salvaged by a company from San Francisco, a group of divers, and removed a lot of the precious metals and brasses and so forth from the *Pomona* for about two weeks before the wreck keeled over to the starboard side and collapsed down the sides of this submerged wash rock to the bottom at about 40 feet deep.

Today the site of the *Pomona* is popular with scuba divers who come to Fort Ross to explore the remains of the *Pomona*.

No visit to Fort Ross would be complete without a salute from one of the cannons, or pieces of artillery, that were employed here to defend the settlement. What we're going to do, then, is to salute our visit today to Fort Ross. Dan is going to assist me by using some of the accouterments or the tools that would normally be used to load and fire a Howitzer such as this one. Normally it takes a crew of about six people to do this task, but the two of us are going to perform the operation that six people might be used to do. So the first thing that would be done in order to clear out any remaining debris that might still be inside the barrel of the cannon is to use this tool called the worm. The worm, then, would be placed into the muzzle of the piece and turned to extract any pieces of burning cartridge that might still be remaining inside the barrel of the cannon.

Once that task is completed, then the sponge would be moistened in this bucket of water that's just here in front of the piece, kept handy at all times. Then the sponge would be introduced into the muzzle of the piece and pushed all the way back to the breach of the piece as the vent is being tended and then withdrawn to make sure that any of those remaining pieces of debris, or sparks, or embers, or slow burning pieces of powder in there are fully extinguished, because the next thing to do, then, is to handle the cartridge.

The cartridge is kept to the rear of the piece, about two meters to the rear, in a wooden box. It's withdrawn from the box. Normally it is contained inside of a linen or wool bag, but we're using foil because of the safety factor. It is then introduced carefully into the muzzle of the piece as the vent is still being tended, and then the rammer is used to push the cartridge up against the breach. Now at this point, if we were going to fire a projectile out of the piece, we would add that projectile, whether that be a ball, or whether that be chain shot—two balls connected by a piece of chain—or whether that be grape shot, or if it was nails, or glass, or anything else that we might want to fire out there. Those things would then be introduced on

top of the cartridge. Then possibly a moistened wool or peat moss wad would be placed on top of that to protect it from any sparks or also to protect it from rolling out of the end of the barrel.

Next the vent pick is introduced into the vent to puncture a hole in the cartridge itself so that the quill, made from the shaft of a feather, can be introduced into the powder charge. Now the quill goes down the vent and makes contact with the black powder charge in the breach.

Finally, the piece would then be aimed. Now aiming a piece like this is not a very precise science. This wedge-shaped piece of wood called the quoin would elevate the barrel one way or the other and extend the range or shorten the range. If the gun commander wanted to turn the cannon piece to the left or to the right, he would simply slap the cheeks of the trail and the piece would then be levered to the right or to the left to point it one way or the other. Pieces like this were not known for their accuracy. They have very short barrels, but they did have a large diameter ball or projectile that went down range.

The very last thing, then, after aiming would be, of course, to salute our friends and visitors that have come to Fort Ross. This historically was done all the time. Now before we fire this, we need to kind of warn everyone in the fort that this is going to happen. We do that by announcing—One, two, three. Fire in the hole! Fire in the hole! Fire in the hole! Agun!

[Sound of cannon being fired]

Well, that concludes our tour of Fort Ross. We hope you enjoyed our visit today, and that you learned a bit about the history of Russian America.

Running Time: 28:06