

# A RUSSIAN IN CALIFORNIA: FERDINAND VON WRANGELL

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In 1829 the directors of the Russian American Company chose the thirty-four year old Ferdinand von Wrangell to govern their distant colonies in Alaska and California. The young man had achieved a brilliant reputation as Arctic explorer and circumnavigator and was to prove himself an able administrator as well.

Having reached Sitka, the company headquarters, Wrangell set to work to reverse the trend of declining profits suffered by the operation in the North Pacific. Ruthless hunting of the sea otter, the chief trading item, had severely depleted this resource. Costs of maintaining the trading stations remained high but the yield in fur fell ever lower. Some economies would have to be made if the venture was to survive.

It was for reasons of economy that the Ross settlement had been made in 1812 on Bodega Bay, north of San Francisco Bay. Ninety-five Russians and eighty Aleut hunters built an enclosure, residences, barracks, chapel and storehouses. Grain and vegetables were planted, fruit trees were set out, and livestock purchased from the Spanish. Ross' agricultural output was to supply the needs of the Alaskan colonies, thus ending the costly dependence of those stations upon provisions that had to reach the North Pacific across the vast reaches of Siberia. The theory was excellent but, unfortunately, Ross farmers were unable to come near to meeting the provisioning needs.

Wrangell made two visits to Ross and decided that the solution rested with the acquisition of more and better land from the Spanish — and later the Mexican — government. In pursuit of this purpose Wrangell traveled to Mexico City for negotiations, but the Czar's reluctance to recognize the new Republic made his task futile. As a consequence of the failure to enlarge the California agricultural enterprise, it was deemed expedient to sell the Ross settlement. This abandonment of the California colony meant that the gap between the cost of the Alaskan operations and its earnings could never be closed and signalled the ultimate result. Some thirty years after the sale of Ross, the other American possessions were sold as well.

Wrangell was a discreet civil servant and did not write anything of his disappointed expectations. He did, however, publish his observations on the natives of California and Alaska. While he was not a trained ethnologist, his notes reveal considerable perception and care. Years before he had studied the natives of northern Siberia, so he brought some experience to his investigations of the American Indians.

Most of Wrangell's reports concerned Alaskan natives but all, like the following excerpt on the Indians of upper California, were published in the work compiled by Karl E. von Baer, *Beitrage zur Kenntnis der rassischen Reiches und der angrenzenden Lander Asiens* (St. Petersburg, 1839). Wrangell's observations on the California natives have not previously been published in English.



# SOME REMARKS ABOUT THE SAVAGES ON THE NORTHWEST COAST OF AMERICA

## *The Indians of Upper California*

On an excursion to the area of the colony of Fort Ross (under 38°33' north latitude) I got to know the Indian tribes which live near our settlements. They inhabit the valleys of the mountain chain which surrounds Ross almost completely, as well as the plain beyond, towards the east, through which the river Slavanka runs, pouring into the sea about seven miles south of the colony.

After the harvest of wheat and barley from the steep slopes of the mountains had been brought in, and other necessary farm work had been done in Ross, we started for the plains. One of my companions had been wounded in his ear by an Indian arrow the year before in the plains we were about to visit. Recently some individuals of the same tribe had attacked and plundered the nearby Spanish mission of San Francisco. Such heroic deeds made us respect the savages and we decided to honor them accordingly, that is to say, to provide ourselves with an escort and loaded pistols. Our detachment was thus made up of three officers and twenty-one men, among whom were seven Russians, two Yakuts, six Aleuts, four Indian vaqueros and two interpreters, all of whom carried well-cut quivers on their back.

It was on September 10 (1833) that we commenced our excursion. In this season the horses were worn out because of too frequent use and scanty feed. A long drought had sharply reduced the supply of forage for Ross animals. To assure ourselves adequate transport, we took along an extra horse for every man, and two mules to carry our four-day food supply.

After crossing the little river Slavanka at its now sandy mouth we turned left and, with our backs to the sea, went uphill through defiles, woods and thickets, toward the more open regions. Even though we rode on foot paths which the Indians walked from their plains to the sea shore to gather shells we met nobody. When we finally reached a meadow of lush growth we heard singing in a loud voice. Our interpreters hurried ahead in order to investigate if we were to meet with friend or enemy and our impatience to get to know the inhabitants of this hermitage induced us to follow on the heels of the *avant garde*. Thus, chasing along at a gallop, we encountered an old Indian woman gathering herbs into a basket woven of fine root grass. She was petrified with fear, but with some trouble we learned from her that beyond a nearby woods some Indian families were living. They had doubtlessly already noticed us and gone into hiding for fear of falling into the hands of the Spaniards, who frequently went on Indian hunts in order to convert their prey to Christianity. The woman said she was gathering seeds for food and had been singing loudly in order to drive away evil spirits. She was always successful in putting them to flight because her song was echoed a hundredfold from the nearby mountains. After calming down the old woman and assuring her that her voice had not called forth any evil beings, we left her and continued on our way.

The first Indian camp was erected under a huge oak, in a rather large, wide valley enclosed by low hills, on the banks of a little river that flows into the Slavanka. Warm air, a beautiful night brightened by the moonlight, the flaming campfires — the horses grazing in the high grass — all together composed a picture touching feeling and fantasy in the same agreeable way. Only the penetrating howls of coyotes interrupted the

solemn calm of nature. When this stopped at daybreak we hurried on our way impatient to reach the much praised plains and their happy inhabitants. Soon the region became more open, immeasurable meadows of fruitful soil and lush growth of green grass spread before us; but nowhere was a trace of inhabitants. Suddenly we discovered smoke coiling up on the rim of the plain. The interpreters and vaqueros concluded that it would have to be an Indian village of numerous people, and told us so with some horror. The spaciousness of the plain allowed us to line up our little army of five people and gallop onward before the Indians would have time to hide in the brush. When we came near we saw only burning bushes and no traces of the presence of human beings. On and on, gorgeous oak forests, clean as English parks, alternated with grassy meadows; finally we came to the Slavanka which dries up at some places during the summer. It was about five *sazhen* wide (thirty-five feet) but only three feet deep where we waded through. When we had settled down in the dense woods of the left bank to take our midday meal we heard the voices of some Indians who seemed to be coming closer. We hid the horses which had been set free for feeding and sent the interpreters ahead to meet the coming ones. They proved to be peaceful visitors who had been tempted to come in order to see us. The whole bunch consisted of about fifteen men; the women and children had been left behind in the next village. We learned from these savages that the plunderers of the Spanish mission had been mostly Indians who had escaped from the mission. In devastating the mission they had sought revenge for the disturbance of the quiet life of the peace-loving valley dwellers and they now lived in the impenetrable forest beyond the plain before us, being ready to reject any attack of their suppressors by force. Among other things, our companions also learned that a respected Indian chief who had visited Fort Ross and had been treated very friendly by the Russians, was staying now in the vicinity. I expressed my wish to see him and asked our guests to tell him of our arrival. The oldest of the group immediately chose a younger one for a delegate; that one wrapped his light clothing around his hips, took the bow in his hands and disappeared so fast that we did not find time to reward him with a present for his readiness to serve us. The open, serene, carefree physiognomy and the flattering ways of these savages appealed to me immensely; thus we invited them to visit us in our camp, and they promised to do so. We were assured that we might build our camp wherever we pleased. Before evening we reached the largest of the plains; it was at first treeless, perfectly plain, lushly grown with fragrant herbs, and immeasurable to the eye with a diameter no less than forty *verst* (about twenty-five miles). To the right and left mountains rose again, from whose familiar looks we could conclude the closeness of Ross, from where they are also visible. We were about twenty-five *verst* direct distance away from Ross, but between us lay unsurmountable mountains and gorges. In order to circuit them we had covered at least seventy-five *verst*. The Slavanka runs along the western mountain range here and joins a creek that winds through the plain. We turned to the side now and returned to the meadows spreading on either side of the rivers. Night fell as we were in one of these beautiful oak groves which shade the plain here and there. The horses almost disappeared in the high, fragrant grass that covered the meadows. The campfires lit up among the foliage of hundred-year-old oaks; deep silence fell on this region so richly equipped by nature. Hardy had the nightly guard, the coyote, started its complaining howl than our new friends the Indians arrived at our fires. After having received tobacco, zwieback, glass beads and other trifles, they settled down in a circle with their fellow-countrymen, our interpreters and the vaqueros and began their favorite pastime; one may well say, the men's only one, if circumstances allow it, the game pair or unpair. Two players sit opposite each other, on both sides of them singing groups settle down whose melodic chants are interrupted only by the shouts of the guessing player; his opponent strives to hide a number of small sticks held in one hand behind his back.

while he makes fast and various movements with his arms and with his other, free hand beats rhythm of the music on his chest. The game always lasts until one of the players has lost all his little belongings. Our guests and the vaqueros were occupied with this all through the night until daybreak.

I wished to see our friends' village, so they hurried to prepare their tribal relatives for our visit. When this was done they led us on about ten verst with such agility and unbelievable speed that we had to trot our horses in order to keep up with them. We found the Indian village upon sandy ground entrenched behind thickets and dry ditches. It was inhabited by five to six interrelated families. The women had erected these temporary dwellings of the flexible sticks of sand- and other willows, and stuck them lightly into the ground, in such an immensely tasteful way, that the sight of it pleased me greatly. The different shades of colors and the varied size of willow leaves — the willow exists there in the greatest variety — gave the open-top huts a very special, rural look. The side opening which serves as an entrance is splendidly and carefully decorated with foliage; several huts are connected through inside passages.

The leaves still retained their freshness; but before they wither the inhabitants will have left their friendly dwellings; the women loading their babies and their few belongings on their back, carrying the pack with a strap which runs across the forehead; the men deciding the new dwelling place and swiftly erecting a new little village only to be left again in a few days.

The women and old folks were frightened by our appearance and seemed as if they wanted to be left alone in their peace and quiet; yet they were friendly and showed us everything that belonged to their poor housekeeping. In a few baskets lay a supply of dough of crushed acorns and a kind of groats prepared from wild rye and other seed-corns; moreover there were fish which they caught in the creek by strewing a powder made from a root called soap root on the surface of the water. This stuns the fish and makes them float. The hunt is the men's business, while the women have to carry heavy loads and do all the heavy work. This unusual distribution of work probably accounts for the strange phenomenon that the women are generally of a much stronger physique than the men, who seem to be weaker even though they look big and well-proportioned.

The Indians tell us that in the summertime neither fog nor rain dim the serene sky of these plains; the air is supposed to be warm and changes little; in the winter heavy rains fall; the Slavanka rises above its banks and floods low areas, giving new strength to vegetation. The woods consist mainly of three kinds of oaks, of laurels, of a tree called *Tschage*, and of a tree called palm in Ross, but which actually is the strawberry tree. Herbs are extremely varied and fragrant. Of animals we have seen only wild goats (*Ursus gulo*), and coyote; but doubtlessly the same genera of animals are to be found here which are native to upper California in general.

This limited information we owe to our brief acquaintance with the Indian tribes dwelling on the Slavanka plains. But since I had the chance to see these savages several times in Ross, I will be permitted to pass on some impressions of these people and the country which they inhabit.

All areas of upper California which are separated from each other by mountain ranges, rivers, position of the sea and other natural boundaries are inhabited by Indians whose language and perhaps even origin are not at all alike, even though the peculiarity of the climate and of earth products, the way of life and the equally low stage of

culture on which these savages stand would perhaps justify the opinion that there is perfect agreement in their customs. The Indians in Bodega have great trouble understanding the language of those in the Slavanka plains; the language of tribes north of Ross is completely unintelligible to them. Immediately across the mountain range bounding these plains to the east, still different ones, entirely strange to the other tribes, lead their nomadic life. At the mission St. Carlos (near Monterey) eleven different tribes with language differences have been counted in the area. However, so long as no sufficient dictionaries have been compiled and the language has not been subjected to etymological research, one has to be careful not to believe blindly the statement of the Indians that these languages are quite different; close investigation would perhaps show some relationship, and they would then appear as branches of a common stem of language, in the same way as different people are branches of a large tribe.

The same causes which estranged so many tribes consisting of only a few individuals and living short distances from each other have also produced the remaining characteristic of these Indians. Since they nourish themselves mainly with acorns, wild chestnuts and seeds of various plants, they cannot form a numerous group and are forced to leave the villages that are becoming too large and to lead a nomadic life in order to find enough supplies. Even the settled dwellers of larger, favorably situated communities have to gather their food from great distances.

While such a way of life makes them accustomed to constant changing of place, it forbids them to lay in large supplies and removes all care for the future, while ever encouraging physical activity, it must also nourish the tendency for independence native to the Americans. This must express itself in all their games, their songs, their language, even in their handicraft, such as is seen in their finery. Head ornaments, belts, carriages, etc., largely made of feathers, not only reveal their imagination but also a certain sense of beauty. Their speech, melodic voices, and chants agreeably impress the ear and contain none of that sad monotony and those difficult to pronounce, unclear, gargling sounds which strike one disagreeably in language and song of the Tlingits and Aleuts living on the sea, and with northern Americans and Chukchis in general.

Their dance betrays the savages; but the play of their fantasy captivates the impartial observer in a very attractive way. Their fantastic dress, vivid movement, chants of the chorus, even the strange decoration of the forest give the whole spectacle a tinge of poetic savageness which is far different from the brutish rudeness characterizing the Tlingit. Used to poverty, and finding all he needs to sustain himself in his forests and plains, he likes to receive objects from obtrusive Europeans; but only when forced to do so, and then hesitantly and only for a short time, will he sacrifice his freedom for them. Tobacco, glass beads, clothes, in short, all he receives, he immediately gambles with in pair or unpair, in order to try Fortune's mood. If he has nothing more to lose, he regrets the loss only because he can no longer gamble and mixes happily into the chorus which always accompanies dance and play. A vegetable diet, mild climate, and the way of life itself have made the temperament of these Indians sanguine. They love dance, song, and game, they are good natured and not vindictive by nature. Thus a murder occurs only rarely. In wars the fearless are esteemed; captured enemies are not killed but are exchanged at the end of the war, never condemned to slavery as is the custom with the Tlingits and other tribes. They tenderly love their children, but demand obedience to the patriarch, and all younger members of the tribe pay great respect to the old, who are experienced and skilled archers. The respect paid to the father is often passed on to the son; but the power of the head is actually small, for each

is free to leave his place to find a new dwelling place.

Intimidated by their great advantages, they seem fearful of the Europeans who hunt their deer with firearms and on swift horses. This fear expresses itself in a certain dullness, which is contrary to the sagacity with which Christian Padres gather these unhappy ones like herds into their missions in order to treat them as less than human beings. One would do them great injustice to call these Indians dull; nature has provided their heart and spirit with rich gifts; in the mission they quickly reach the ranks of their teachers; they easily learn various crafts and trades, become bold and skillful riders, and speak fluent Spanish. Yet since on these first steps of civilization they see nothing which would make up for their lost freedom they seize every chance to retreat into their forests. Such a mighty enemy as the European seemed to them at his first appearance must have infused great fear; but when they learned upon closer acquaintance that their feared enemies were human beings as they were themselves, only with less feeling and justice, hot revenge rose in their hearts. They devastated the herds of their suppressors, stole their horses, attacked the missions by surprise and held them open to plunder. But they killed only those Europeans who had earned their special hatred by cruelty, for instance, some particular Padre. However, this thirst for revenge never conquers a feeling of humanity; it never reaches that state of brutal cruelty to which the Tlingits succumb, for the Tlingit does not spare anyone in such a case. Even the innocent in whose veins runs only a drop of European blood falls under his dagger.

But as we compare the Indians and Tlingits we must not forget that the latter as coast dwellers were without any want of food because of the ocean, the source of nourishment for many millions. Thus they were able to form numerous societies, which communicated among each other. For these reasons they developed a national spirit at an early time, and the drive to own riches awoke and grew early in their hearts. The spirit of mutual communication could animate each and all. Likewise, the right of the stronger could assume that form of cruelty which distinguished the Tlingits. On the other hand, they lost all those agreeable qualities which are alive in all freshness with the Indians of California.