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The Day Russian America Became Alaska

by

Murray Morgan

The Commissioners had arrived at Sitka, General Lovall H. Rousseau from Washington, Captain Alexei Pestchouroff from St. Petersburg. Permission was given for the American troops to land. October 18th, when in a simple ceremony at Sitka, Russian-America became Alaska.

The American troops -- 250 men from Company H of the Second Artillery and Company F of the Ninth Infantry -- were pleased to get ashore. The voyage north from the Presidio in San Francisco had taken three rough weeks. For another ten days the transport John L. Stevens had been forced to remain at anchor well off-shore. Governor Dimitrii Maksutov, who opposed the sale, denied the Americans permission to land until the arrival of the Russian and American commissioners who were appointed to supervise the transfer.

It was the old story of hurry up and wait. The final terms of the Treaty of Cession under which Russia sold its holdings on the American continent to the United States for \$7,200,000 had been worked out in a midnight conference between Secretary of State William Henry Seward and Baron Edouard Stoeckel, Russian Minister to the United States, and signed by them at 4:30 the following morning. The treaty was presented to a startled and reluctant Senate for ratification the same day, only hours before Congress was scheduled to adjourn. The Senate debated the question for a

week before agreeing to the purchase by a one-vote margin. Now, six months later, Congress had still not started action on a bill to appropriate the \$7,200,000 purchase price -- but the ceremony of transfer was taking place.

The Commissioners had arrived at Sitka, General Lovall H. Rousseau from Washington, Captain Alexei Pestchouroff from St. Petersburg. Permission was given for the American troops to land. The launches brought them in from the transport through a harbor crowded with shipping. The Russians had assembled all the vessels used in their fur trade -- the merchantmen, the mother-ships for hunting crews, a gunboat -- and were auctioning them off. The Harbor itself was lovely, spangled with islands, a small perfect volcano -- Mt. Edgecumbe -- rising above the western entrance. But the soldiers were anxious to be on the town.

Sitka -- New Archangel, the Russians called it -- was except for Portland the largest city on the Pacific Coast north of San Francisco, and perhaps the most cultivated. It boasted a theater on the second floor of the wooden castle, where plays were given in French as well as Russian; a public library which received quarterly shipments of books from St. Petersburg; two institutes, one geological, the other zoological; four lower schools, and a seminary which taught among other things navigation, mathematics, astronomy and bookkeeping. A reporter for the Alta California claimed that no upperclass home was without its piano. The Lutheran Church boasted a German pipe organ, "the second finest west of the Mississippi." The onion-domed Orthodox church was a building of quiet beauty.

These may not have been the attractions most on the minds of the troops as they came ashore for the ceremony marking the greatest land sale since the Louisiana Purchase. The Russian authorities had called in their people from the outlying posts preparatory to closing up shop. From the transport the soldiers had seen the Russian and Indian women, many of them remarkably pretty and fashionably dressed, walking through town. They were unavailable. The Russian husbands and fathers were watchful and the community resented the sale and was in no mood to welcome the Americans. There were, however, a number of other women recently arrived from San Francisco's Barbary Coast eager to help the troops celebrate the new dispensation in old ways.

But first the ceremony. The Americans, in dress uniforms of dark blue blouses and light blue trousers, assembled at the shore and under the command of General Jefferson C. Davis (who had fought for the north in the Civil War, and later against the Indians in the West) marched to the governor's residence on the knoll, where they lined up alongside the town garrison, 90 sailors and 180 soldiers from a Siberian regiment, the Russians in dark uniforms trimmed with red, and glazed caps.

The ceremony was planned to be brief and simple. Like the negotiations leading up to the purchase, it became tangled. At 3:30 Prince Maksutov emerged from the castle with General Rousseau and Captain Pestchouroff. The troops from both countries presented arms.

Pestchouroff signalled for the Russian flag to be lowered.

The wind blustering in from the Pacific had wrapped the flag tightly around the pole. It defied the pull on the ropes. A bosun's chair was rigged and a sailor from the gunboat Ossipee went up and cut the flag loose. It fluttered down onto the bayonets of the Russian troops.

After some delay the guns of the Ossipee saluted the Russians. Captain Pestchouroff turned to General Rousseau:

"By the authority of his Majesty the Emperor of all the Russias, I transfer to you, the agent of the United States, all the territory and dominion now possessed by his Majesty on the continent of America and in the adjacent islands, according to a treaty made between the two powers."

The American replied briefly. The stars and stripes were raised without hitch. The guns of the Russian fort boomed a salute to the new owners. A reporter on Castle Hill noted proudly, "We stood now upon American soil."

General Rousseau, a man of considerable delicacy, had asked that in deference to the feelings of the Russians who were losing a homeland, no cheers be given, but neither the troops nor the speculators on hand for the transfer could resist giving a few huzzahs. General Davis, a man of no delicacy at all, told the Russian commander to clear out the barracks immediately, and his men were moving in.

Few found much to cheer about in the early years of American occupation. In Congress, the House of Representatives, huffy over the way in which the Treaty had been arranged,

seriously considered welching on the national commitment and not appropriating the money to pay for Alaska.

The nation's press took sides about the merits of the territorial acquisition. While the opponents of the purchase lost, they coined the more memorable phrases. Such epithets as "Seward's Ice Box" and "Polaria" were to embarrass Alaska for generations. In the end, the mysterious allocation of some \$125,000 in funds from the Russian Minister's account may well have been decisive in securing passage of the bill appropriating the \$7,200,000 purchase price.

The historian Hector Chevigny has noted the irony of the fact that President Andrew Johnson believed the bribery had been resorted to to consummate the deal in which "a nation having small desire to sell did so to a nation that was not eager to buy, their motives the belief that they would please each other."

Having finally made the appropriation, Congress chose to forget Alaska. For two decades bills establishing a semblance of home rule in the area didn't just fail of passage, not one reached the floor for debate. The neglect was almost total.

Before the sunset gun was fired by the American garrison on the first day of our possession of Alaska, stakes were being driven into the soft ground of Sitka marking out homesites and places of business. Within weeks a newspaper was extolling the attractions of the mild southeast coast, two bowling alleys were under construction, and a shadow city government elected -- the customs collector as mayor. But enthusiasm declined along with Congressional interest.

Congress dallied and entrepreneurs departed, complaining, "If you don't own it, why build it?" Three years after the Czarist flag fell and the American flag rose, the population in Sitka had dropped by two-thirds. A census taken by an army lieutenant showed only 391 "civilians" -- the euphemism for those with no Indian or Aleut connections. Of these civilians, ten were saloonkeepers and 29 professional prostitutes.

In 1877 the troops were withdrawn from Sitka. They were sent south to join in the chase of Chief Joseph, the recalcitrant Nez Perce. Their departure left the customs agents of the Treasury Department as the ranking United States officials. It was an unwelcomed elevation. The Secretary of the Treasury seriously proposed closing the customs offices in Alaska because customs receipts did not equal the salaries of the collectors.

Time passed, so did an organic act establishing ground rules for self government, and eventually the slice of Russian empire became a territory, then a state: self-governing, potentially rich, and independent as a polar bear.

The term, Seward's folly has long ago drowned in a sea of statistics, for in the century under the U.S. flag, Alaska has yielded up more than \$700 million in gold, \$225 million in copper, and additional hundreds of millions from salmon and other seafoods, timber, furs, and more recently oil. No one has yet tabulated the value of the 49th state's newest gold rush -- tourists -- but one operator of steamships, busses and tours estimates it spends more in Alaska annually than Uncle Sam paid in the famed purchase.

Today, Castle Hill looks down on a Sitka harbor busy with the coming and going of fishing boats, Japanese freighters serving the city's new forest product mills, and the graceful Alaska ferryliners providing a smooth link with "the Outside."

Traces of a Russian past are still visible in Alaska. Sitka's fabulous collection of Russian icons, paintings, tapestries and other church treasures are once more on display. Juneau is the setting for a Russian church with 300-year-old icons, and the onion domes of Orthodoxy can still be seen rimmed against the hills of Kodiak, Kenai and other communities. (Ketchikan is content with a totem containing a carved bishop, a saint and an archangel.)

Come October on Castle Hill they will be hauling down the Russian Imperial Eagle again -- a historical re-enactment that is part of the colorful statewide Alaska Purchase Centennial expected to draw a record number of visitors to the 49th state.

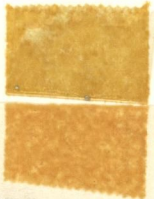
Alaskans like to point out that \$10 million is being spent in 41 Alaska communities to celebrate that Centennial, a way of saying "let's celebrate -- you're only a hundred once!"



FERRYLINER TAKU, one of three auto and passenger ferries which ply the protected waters of the Inside Passage, cruises through Whitestone Narrows en route to Sitka. Scenes like this are typical along the 673-mile route of the Alaska "Marine Highway" from Prince Rupert, B.C. to Skagway, Alaska.

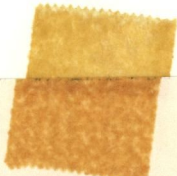


MINNIE, MARY BOY
AND YOUNG OF MARY
HOLLAND, MARY BOY
AND YOUNG OF MARY



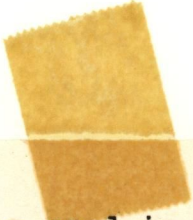
MODELS OF ESKIMO MOTHER AND CHILD are popular attraction in the Alaska State Museum at Juneau. Parka worn by the child is actually Siberian made. It was traded to Alaska Eskimos at a time when travel between Siberia and Alaska was common. Garment is made of swansdown.





GOLD RUSH TOWN cabins on the 40-acre grounds of Alaska-67 near Fairbanks are not replicas; they're the real authentic structures used by sourdoughs and pioneers and rescued from deterioration for display at A67. The site -- which also contains an Alaska wildlife zoo, a Yukon River sternwheeler, Eskimo and Indian villages, mining valley, amusement rides, museum, and other features -- is the official exposition site of the Alaska Purchase Centennial celebration.





OLD RUSSIAN BLOCKHOUSE design was used in this authentic full-sized reproduction at Sitka where the transfer of Alaska from Russian to U.S. hands took place. Other evidences of the city's rich Russian past may be seen in an old Russian-built Mission building and other structures.



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