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RUSSIAN CHURCH BELLS ON CALIFORNIA'S EL CAMINO REAL

*Copper flowed to a flame, wrought a canon,
a poem ablaze from the ringing of the bells.*

– V.V. Simikin

An interesting postscript to the 1837 meetings between the Alaskan Orthodox missionary Fr. John Veniaminov and the Spanish Franciscan friars of California are the intriguing reports of Russian church bells in the Roman Catholic missions of Alta California along the King's Highway—the El Camino Real.

The most well-known bell was brought to light in 1920 in an orange grove near the ruins of Mission San Fernando del Rey de España, 435 miles from

the Russian Fort Ross, and forty miles from San Pedro, where St. Peter the Aleut was reportedly captured.

A Russian inscription on the 150-pound bell reads: "In the Year 1796, in the month of January, this bell was cast on the Island of Kodiak by the blessing of Archmandrite Ioaseph, during the sojourn of Alexsandr Baranov." As such, Kodiak was the site of the first bell foundry on the west coast of North America, and this historic bell is thought to have been brought to New Archangelsk (Sitka) by Baronov himself, who as chief-manager of the Russian American Company, would move the Russian-American headquarters there from Kodiak.

Fascinating letters emerged with the 1861 Russian publication of T.A. Tikhmenev's, *A History of the Russian-American Company*, one of which was from Grigory Shelikov, whose initial exploration and trade laid the groundwork for the company's incorporation. The letter was written to Alexander Baranov from Okhotsk, Siberia, on May 8, 1794:

...It would also be well to sound the hours by striking boards (I suppose this means some resonant wooden piece), determining the time by (sand) hour glass, and if time permits, with the help of artisans, to cast a bell which may also be useful for the church.... At present I have sent you twenty poods (about 800 pounds) of copper. It would not be bad, if through your exertions you could find some American copper from Copper River.

On May 20 of the following year, Baronov answered from St. Paul Harbor:

I found ore about Kodiak and Cook Inlet in great quantities; I tried in a small way to melt it into metal, but time did not permit to work into cast iron, and besides I do not know how. I asked Father Juvenaly to show us how to melt in hand ovens and small furnaces but did not get an answer. We need two men who know how to smelt iron in hand ovens and small forges.ⁱ

Father Juvenaly, of course, was one of the original Valaam Monastery monks sent with St. Herman of Alaska. In a later letter, Baronov notes: "Our Shaposhnikov has cast bells here for the local church, weight five poods (about 203 pounds). For a long time past I had intention of going to Copper

River for American copper.” The initials of the bell-master Vasili Shaposhnikov are inscribed on the Kodiak bell as well.

In his 1821 reports on the Russian-American colonies, company manager Kyrill Khlebnikov describes the resident colonial artisans, including the coppersmiths. It is clear that bell casting was well underway:

Coppersmiths: These are situated in three shops. At two of them they are engaged in making new boilers from tin and copper; bowls, teakettles, copper pots, measures, funnels and other utensils, a part of which is used for trade with California and with savages along the North of America and also for supplying other colonies, for no utensils are imported from Russia. In the third, they manufacture small articles for ships, and bells, not larger than five poods (about 200 pounds) The small bells are used on the ships and the large ones for trade with California.ⁱⁱ

Later, Khlebnikov records that with the establishment of the northernmost Spanish missions at San Rafael and Solano in 1819 and 1824, “the [Spanish] missionaries being in need of various materials and instruments for their missions, had frequent intercourse with Fort Ross. There was a continuous trade between the two.”ⁱⁱⁱ Even today, visitors to the restored Solano mission are told that at the time of the mission’s founding, a mule train of gifts, including a Russian bell was sent from Fort Ross.

The Kodiak Bell Travels South

How then did the Kodiak bell migrate to California?

The harsh winter of 1806 had left the colony at New Archangelsk (Sitka) near starvation, and Nikolai Rezanov, co-founder of the Russian-American Company, hastily assembled a crew to obtain food and supplies from the Spanish in Alta California. His Russian ship, the *Juno*, carried trade items such as linen and other kinds of cloth, handkerchiefs, needles, boots, saws, axes, and bed-ticking. They arrived in San Francisco on March 27, 1806 and over the next six weeks Rezanov negotiated with the Spanish governor and presidio commander Don José Darío Argüello, for wheat, barley, beans, peas, flour, tallow, salt, and other commodities. The Kodiak bell is also believed to have been part of the exchange, possibly because it was one of the portable

goods on hand that could be bartered under such dire circumstances. That this particular bell was not originally intended for trade is clear from the inscription memorializing the blessing of Archmandrite Ioasaph, the leader of the monk-missionaries sent from Valaam Monastery in 1794.

Rezanov was not only among the first Russians to circumnavigate the globe, but he was a distinguished statesman, diplomat, and scholar, who had the interests of the company's colonists and native workers at heart, and his decision to navigate stormy spring seas to obtain food and supplies was nearly heroic. While he hoped to put New Archangelsk on a sustainable footing, Rezanov's primary purpose in Alaska was to establish order among the Russian colonies, to foster Russian-Native relationships, and to correct abuses. Over a decade earlier he had been instrumental in advising Empress Catherine II to send the first Valaam Monastery missionaries to Kodiak.

Rezanov not only returned to Sitka on June 8, 1806 with the necessary food, but as the engaged fiancé of the Spanish governor's daughter, María de la Concepción Argüello, and with a treaty outlining Russian-Spanish colonial trade and territorial policies. However, on his way through Siberia the following spring to present the treaty to Tsar Nicholas I and receive permission to marry a Catholic, Rezonov died of a fever in Krasno Yar. His Spanish fiancé never married, and eventually became a Dominican nun.

It is believed that the bell eventually reached Mission San Fernando as a gift of Don Argüello, who had also founded the nearby presidio of Los Angeles. At that time a cross and the words "DE Sn FERNO" were hammered into the bell's surface.

In 1839, after the expulsion of the Franciscan friars and forced secularization of the California missions, a 48,000 acre land-grant including mission land was deeded to Antonio Del Valle, the Mexican Republic army officer who had overseen the secularization of Mission San Fernando. (In a fascinating turn-about, his grandson, Reginaldo Del Valle, who inherited the ranch, would later petition for the restoration of the missions.) At the time of the 1846 U.S. annexation of California, only a decade after Fr. John Veniaminov's visit, the former beautiful mission grounds and buildings were near ruin from local landowners scavenging building materials. By the end of the 19th century, Americans were using the original quadrangle cloister as a hog farm.^{iv}

Sometime before 1860, the Kodiak bell disappeared from the San Fernando mission grounds, and was rediscovered in 1920 in an orange orchard on the Del Valle-Camulos Ranch by Californian Alice Harriman, a campanologist

and historian. According to Mrs. Harriman, “the bell was taken from its mission belfry and hidden on the ranch to protect it from vandals. When times grew more propitious, it was taken from its hiding place and hung on a timber frame, from which it was used to summon ranch hands to dinner.”

Mrs. Harriman sent copies of the Russian inscription to Dr. Herbert Bolton, an historian at the University of California at Berkeley; Rev. A.P. Kashevaroff, curator of the Alaskan Historical society; and to Dr. Alexis Kall, a Russian music teacher and close friend of Igor Stravinsky, all of whom contributed to the translation. Interestingly, an additional translation was contributed by Archimandrite Gerasim Schmaltz, a Russian priest-monk serving near Kodiak, Alaska. The inscribed bell remains today on the Camulos Ranch and can be seen by visitors.

Other Russian Bells in California

For decades, two smaller bells hung beside the Kodiak bell on the Del Valle-Camulos Ranch, but from old photos these are believed not to be Russian bells, and their provenance remains unknown.^v However, Russian bell-making continued for some time and, as late as the 1860's, U.S. Customs logs record: “On Nov. 16, 1868, the Russian American Co., from Sitka, shipped on steamer “Alexander,” M.C. Erskine, Master, nine bells, weight not given, consigned to M. Klinkovstrom, San Francisco.” Klinkovstrom was the Russian consul in San Francisco.^{vi}

Another bell that was displayed for some years at the San Fernando Mission also appears to be of Russian make, although it lacks any inscription. Whether it was cast in Kodiak or Sitka as a trade item, brought in as a colonial church bell from European Russia, or was bartered locally when the Russian outpost of Fort Ross was closed in 1842, is unknown. One popular theory is that it was part of the mule train of gifts sent from Fort Ross to the new Franciscan mission at Solano.

In October, 2015, this uninscribed bell was sent by Catholic Archbishop Jose Gomez of Los Angeles and the Mission San Fernando del Rey de España to Holy Resurrection Orthodox Church in Kodiak, as a sign of friendship and unity between Native California Roman Catholics and Native Alaskan Orthodox. It now hangs outside the Kodiak church. In turn, a replica of the inscribed Del Valle-Campulos bell was given to the San Fernando mission by California Orthodox Christians as a replacement for the bell sent to Kodiak.^{vii}

The Russians say that each bell has a distinctive voice, and we can surely add, its own fascinating history. ✱

i P. A. Tikhmenev, "A History of the Russian-American Company," Pierce and Donnelly (trans.) Univ. of Washington Press, 1978.

ii Kyrill Khlebnikov, *Colonial Russian America: Kyrill T. Khlebnikov's Reports, 1817-1832*, Oregon Historical Society Press, Portland, 1982 (Original Russian version published 1861, St. Petersburg, pg. 97).

iii Ibid., original, pg. 148.

iv Retrieved, April 28, 2016: http://waterandpower.org/museum/San_Fernando_Mission.html

v Mark D. Galperin, "The Oldest Known Self-Dated Russian Church Bell Made in America," Blagovest Bells, San Rafael, CA, Uploaded March, 2012, https://www.academia.edu/4924473/2012-03-27_Galperin_The_Oldest_Known_Self-Dated_Russian_Church_Bell

vi "The Russian-Alaskan Church Bell at Rancho Campulos: Biography of Archimandrite Ioasaph." Retrieved on April 26, 2016 from SCV, http://www.scvhistory.com/scvhistory/alaska_ArchimandriteJoasaph.htm

vii "Russian Orthodox Bell Returned to Kodiak," http://www.mercurynews.com/ci_24300834/russian-orthodox-bell-returned-kodiak, Retrieved May 4, 2016.

Opposite: Campanologist and historian Alice Harriman with the Kodiak bell she discovered in 1920 on the Del Valle-Camulos ranch.

