

**H00-50**

**Donald Lynch**

**Tanana Yukon Historical Society tapes**

Dr. Donald Lynch gives a speech at the Tanana Yukon Historical Society meeting on October 28, 1971, entitled "Russian American Company 1784-1867."

Don Lynch says he's a buff. He started out as an Irish history buff; then became a Civil War buff, then a Revolutionary War buff, and then the years 1939 and 1940 became his interest. Finally he became interested (as a buff) in the Russian American Company.

His dissertation was on the Ukraine. It turns out that a lot of the Russians hired by the Russian government to go around Ukraine and write about it also went around Siberia and Alaska and wrote about those places. So he started reading these writings and became more and more interested. It's a fun, weird historical period. It is one of those that have a clear beginning and end. It began with Russians coming over to Alaska to hunt and trap.

Russian historians are very concerned with periodization. American historians are concerned with different schools: revisionist, free-thinkers, etc. Periodization could be applied to, for example, 1741-1799. In 1799 Paul I was shot, because he was supposedly crazy. The same year, he had ordered 90,000 Cossacks to invade India, and he decided to charter the Russian American Co. The company had 20-year leases, getting reorganized each time the lease was up. In 1860 the Russians didn't know what to do with Alaska, so they agreed to sell it to Seward. The Russians produced a lot of material documenting the period. In 1861 a two-volume set was written by a Russian, which everyone quotes but no one reads. A lot of texts have been translated now, too.

The Russian American Co. didn't start any wars or trouble; they just tried to mind their own business and make money selling furs. The French, Spanish, British, and Americans were all involved from about 1750-1867. We can see the impact of the geopolitical trends of the times.

The other reason Lynch is interested in the Russian American Co. is because the people that ran it were a bunch of "40-year-old losers." He's 40 right now, and it makes him feel good to know that these men amounted to something. When he turned 40 he came to Alaska, too, and maybe there's a lesson in it for him.

There's a distinguished bibliography and Lynch has made up a list. Hector Chevigny wrote a lot of good books on Russian America. The first real history of Alaska (history of Russian America) was edited by Bancroft. Many quote from it now. These writers were not professors, but buffs like Lynch, so he feels kind of comfortable in what he's talking about.

Lynch has taught Russian history before. He'd like to look at Alaska from a Russian point of view, with some geography thrown in, since that's his profession. In the

museum in Anchorage there's a beautiful wedding gown, passed from mother to daughter for several generations. It was made in Kazan. Lynch points out Kazan on a map of Russia. That's where the story starts, in 1552. At that time Ivan (John) ran this part of the world. He had a lot of enemies. Later in life he became a paranoiac, since so many people wanted to kill him. He built a fortified line on the southern boundaries of the forest...Moscow was only burned a few times during his czar-ship. Fighting has been going on for a long time in this region. It is a difficult terrain to fight on.

Ivan found that he could defeat the Kazan Tartars, an offshoot of the Great Golden Horde of Genghis Khan. He found 30,000 Russian prisoners in the fort. He freed these prisoners and when he was done there wasn't a single Tartar left. He later became known as Ivan the Terrible.

The main line of external communication was in the forested north. This is where he laid his camp and got his articles for trade: timber, furs, and honey. When he took Kazan, he opened up a whole area of Russia as a strategic hinterland.

In 1581 Stroganoff hired a Cossack named Yaramok and went to conquer Siberia. In 1639, the Russians reached the Pacific Ocean. Russians were interested in fur, seal oil, and ivory tusks. Their approach was to have Cossacks go into villages and threaten people; trade hostages with them, who they might intermarry with; make them pay a fur tribute to them; and then beyond the tribute, trade with them for furs. They were tough but they were not out to liquidate or exterminate, says Lynch. One guy had a real monopoly on the fur business, and that was Ivan the Terrible.

Peter the Great, in his last years, had a theory: He didn't think Asia and North America were united by a land bridge. He wanted people to find out whether this was true. There was a series of czars and czarinas that followed him, who were all illegitimate rulers, but followed Peter's orders so that they could keep their claim on the throne. Catherine the Great was one of these.

The first Northern Expedition explored almost the whole northern coast of Russia, until they met the Chukchis, who knew how to fight. The Russians weren't too sure they knew how to sail, so they hired a Dane named Bering, and he came all the way across Russia to Petropavlosk on the Kamchatka Peninsula.

The first trading routes were northerly routes. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century routes moved a little farther south. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century they moved all the way south. The reason the Russians stayed in the north was that they were afraid of the Chinese and the Tartars. In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, though, they took care of the Tartars once and for all. They found that the Chinese were not so much to be feared and they became very interested in the \_\_\_\_\_(?)\_\_\_\_\_ Basin, which led to the establishment of Vladivostok.

There was a system behind the fur business. Russians actually preferred to sell furs to the Chinese, not the British. The only place they could trade with the Chinese was Fiaska

Selenga?

(?), on the Selendula River system. It was one of few passes leading from the Soviet Far East into Mongolia and China. It was the route used by the Mongols.

The Chinese were big bluffers. (They had the Russians convinced they could fight.) Bering had to build his own ships at Petropavlosk. The major base of operations was transferred to Auhutz, and from there to Yakutsk, and then to Irkutsk. Irkutsk was where the Russian American Co. started. A man named Shelikof was a promoter. He had a rich wife with connections.

They discovered they could do the same thing with intimidation, etc., in villages in the Aleutian Islands as they had in Russia, to procure furs. At the same time, they were slitting their own throats; it was not an economically profitable venture. Shelikof tried to have a monopoly, but Lynch says it was hard since he had a Russian name. Shelikof had a son-in-law named Rezanov.

In 1787 the first proposal by Catherine the Great to establish a monopoly was made. The Russians had beaten the Turks and Swedes; the plague was over. It was a good year for Russia. Catherine toured her new conquests. She met the emperor of Austria. On the way back, Rezanov (who was good friends with Catherine's boyfriend) told Catherine about his idea to have a monopoly. The thing that stopped her was her fear of France and England. She didn't want to make them angry. Rezanov kept on though, and Shelikof kept promoting until he died of a heart attack at age 48. Catherine died and Paul I became czar. Paul didn't like Dubois(?). Somehow, Rezanov became friends with Paul, an impressive feat. He sold him on the idea of a monopoly.

Russia was still worried about England. At the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Russia was strangely allied with Turkey, its traditional enemy. Rezanov got the go-ahead on the monopoly. A few months later, Paul was killed for being insane, and Alexander I became emperor. Rezanov had to resubmit his proposal. He said, "How would you like a lot of free shares in the Russian American Company?" Alexander said, "That sounds great." He and a lot of his friends had shares in the company, and made money off it, so it was easy for Rezanov to get approval for the venture.

There was nothing like this in Russian history before—a company that administered a great big territory. Russian America was considered a Russian colony; it was usually referred to as "the Russian possessions in America." The Russian American Co. was referred to as being not just Russian, but having other non-Russian speaking people. When Alaska was sold, they were selling territory that had not been administratively and politically integrated into the Russian Empire, which made it easy to get rid of.

Rezanov was the administrator. The only two big fur sellers in the world were the Russian American Co. and Hudson Bay Co. Rezanov was doing well, and in love with his beautiful wife, as happy as could be. Then his wife died and he was shaken to the core. Someone suggested he take a world tour. The Russians decide they'll sail around the world. Rezanov says he'll create a whole new empire while he's at it. One thing he

wants to do is open Japan to Russian trade. Another is to visit this place where all the fur has been coming from.

He gets to Kodiak and he's appalled. The only people there are the old, sick, and weak. Everyone's down south. He chases down Baranof, who's fighting the Tlingits, and helps him out (this is the bombing of Sitka in 1804).

He finds out that Russian America can't feed itself. He goes to San Francisco, CA. [Audio quality becomes poor here and it's hard to understand exactly what he says next.] A kid from Rezanov's crew and the daughter of San Francisco's general fall in love. Somehow, this led to the establishment of Ft. Ross. The Russians owned Ft. Ross until they decided it wasn't worth the upkeep, and sold it to a man named Sutter, who found gold there, beginning the California Gold Rush.

No one really knew where Baranov came from. He went bankrupt trading with some people.

In 1783 Kodiak was established. A man (Baranov?) was hired to be the manager. He spent the first winter shipwrecked on Hawaii(?). He was the governor general when he finally got to Kodiak. He found out most everything he had been told wasn't true. He moved the site of the town and made peace with the natives. He married a native woman, and had his first son when he was 50 years old, in Yakutat. He got along well with the Aleuts; he went out in a bidarka just like them. He knew how to handle Russians, too. He'd give them alcohol. He himself could outdrink and outfight every one of them.

Shelikof discovers Catherine the Great is very religious. He goes to the holy senate and asks for a bunch of missionaries to build churches in Alaska. The Russian Church wasn't that enthusiastic about missionary work because most of the men were married. Catherine thought it was a great idea, though, and the missionaries got sent.

Baranov greets his (unexpected) new priests; of course there is no church or rectory for them. The priests also thought the men should get married, instead of living in sin with women. They thought Baranov should marry his common-law wife; he'd never been married before. He was with his common-law wife for life, but he refused to marry her officially, because he didn't want to set this as a precedent for his men, some of whom had left women back in Russia, or wanted to go back to Russia some day.

Baranov was a natural leader who understood his men. Many did marry, of course, and did rather well together. Baranov discovered the American whalers who were floating around up there. He used them to bring furs to Canton, China, to trade, instead of using the established trade route to China. This was a violation of all the regulations, but he made money hand over fist.

In 1812 America went to war with the English. There were a lot of ships in the North Pacific. The Americans rented the Russian American Co. ships, and then sailed furs to Canton under the Russian American Co. flag.

1819 started a new era, that of over-administrating an organization. The Russian Navy decides it's in the interest of Russia that they manage Alaska.

Russia only had one decent port, Archangel. The Navy had a hard time getting to sea, therefore. They knew they'd go to war with the British sooner or later. The Russian Navy was founded by British admirals. Baranov learned from whalers that one of the most strategic locations in the whole world is Sitka, Alaska. That's why the U.S. used it in WWII. It would've been a good place for the Russian Navy if they were going to fight the British in the North Pacific. The Navy also needed sailing experience. They could get money from the Russian American Co. as well, to subsidize their needs. Naval officers were rather scared, also, adds Lynch.

In 1817 Russia decided to make its soldiers farmer<sup>s</sup>, who could live on self-supporting military communes. That way they'd have a big army and it wouldn't cost a thing. Mao Tse-tung also tried this later.

The first thing they did was try to control the whole North Pacific, and exclude the British and Americans. This almost started a war. In 1825 they settled their differences and that's when Alaska's borders were established. The British and the Russians determined the borders.

From 1820-1840 they brought in schools, libraries, churches, and an administrative overburden. They had people who ran on 5-year tours of duty, like Wrangell, for instance. They did their duty and left. There were no Baranovs.

In the 1940s, the Russians sold Ft. Ross, and made a deal with Hudson Bay Co. to lease most of Southeast Alaska to them, instead of fighting them over it. In exchange they got their foodstuffs from Canada. The Hudson Bay Co. came over the Porcupine River and established a post at Ft. Yukon. The Russian American Co. was restricted to the coastal west coast, so they began moving into the Interior to expand their fur trade there. Previously, coastal people had been the middle men between the Russians and Interior trappers. Russians wanted to cut out the middle man. As a result, quite a few Russians got killed. This was one of the origins of the belief by Americans that Alaska natives were pretty wild people. The Russians also got involved in selling things to San Francisco, like ice.

There was a smallpox plague that the Russians got blamed for. One of the results of the Lewis and Clark expedition was to open the Mandan Indians to White traders, who brought smallpox. It moved across the northwest, then to Oregon and British Columbia, into Alaska. The Russians got blamed and they were sensitive about this. They carried out the first successful vaccination program against smallpox west of the Mississippi River. When smallpox reappeared in the 1860s, it did no damage.

They built a cathedral in Sitka. Veniaminov came when he was 27, and lived to be the head of the Russian Orthodox Church.

A new problem was a Baranov-type character named Muraviov. He fought the Chinese and proved they were paper tigers. Czar Nicholas II managed to get into war with France, Turkey, and Sardinia. The Russians lost.

The British sailed around the Black Sea lobbing shells. They decided to take over Petropavlosk. The day before they came cannons were hauled there and it was defended. The Russians almost lost Alaska to this war. The trading companies decided fighting would be better done in Crimea than Alaska. One speculation as to why the British went along with this was that they were afraid that if they didn't, Russia would sell Alaska to America, sort of like what happened with the Louisiana Purchase.

Muraviov left the armor in 1860. He went back to work in the admiralty in St. Petersburg. Grand Duke Constantine was told they were losing money in Alaska that should be invested in another region. "We should get rid of it before it becomes a liability." The Russians were taking land in Spain. They made many enemies. Around 1820, the British aristocracy decides it hates Russia. The Russians were also trying to expand into central Asia.

In 1863 the Polish revolt, and war with England is possible. The British(?) were sinking Yankee ships. The Russians decided they could sink British ships, as long as they didn't have a cannon on them. San Francisco and New York were the two best ports, so the Russian Navy came to use these ports. America thought this was a gesture of friendship. The U.S. was about to go to war with the British anyway.

The U.S. was very interested in Alaska for land, resources, and a telegraph line. Andrew Johnson signed off on the purchase of Alaska; he had a bad reputation, as he was almost impeached. Seward and Sumner got the positive credit for the deal.

There are three bases the U.S. needs to have strategic control: Iceland (gained in 1941), Greenland (gained in 1942), and Alaska. This is why Johnson signed off on the purchase of Alaska.

In 1786 there were 150 Russians in Alaska. By 1860 there were 784. The Russians left behind a substantial native population of mixed heritage, and many literate people. They left behind many towns, coal mines, archives, and natural history. They did all this with about 700 people—quite an achievement.

Lynch ends his lecture.

There is an announcement regarding the Wickersham House and getting state and federal funding to move it and get it going. Don Stetson, Lee Russell, and others are involved.