

H75-06 Richard Pierce
Lecture to the Tanana Yukon Historical Society
May 2, 1974

Richard Pierce introduces his lecture. He will be speaking about the Russian period in Alaska. The population of Alaska was very small at that time. Menenoff estimated the population at 40,000 in 1840. The first American census was in 1870. In 1867 there were about 600 Russians in the region (there were never many Russians here), about 2,500 people of mixed blood, 4,000 Aleuts, 7,000 Tlingit and several thousand in the Interior. There was never any great friction over the land. The first Russian settlements were: Unalaska established in 1772, Three Saints Bay in 1784, English Bay in 1786, Yakutat, Seward, and St. Michael. The Russians may give the chief in the area medals or presents and that was all that was needed to establish themselves on the land. The Russian establishments would be located a few miles from the Native establishments. So there was no depravation of the Natives of land. There may have been trouble over fishing, hunting and women. At the Yakutat settlement the Russians were mistreating the Natives. The Russian objective in Alaska was to get furs. They brought with them from Siberia the practice of *yasak* which was a tribute in furs to the Russian Empire. Every Native male would have to give one or two sable furs per year. This was extended to the Aleutians until 1779 when Catherine II abolished this practice. This is significant because it was the first expression of Russian sovereignty in this region. The Natives were paying a tax to the government and therefore regarded as subjects of the government. Because of the nature of the Natives they were not concerned with individual ownership.

The nature of the Russian administrative functions of the companies: the companies followed the outmoded method of hiring men and the men would hunt on shares. The owner of the ship, church and crewmen would get shares of the proceeds. These trading companies were formed one after the other. When Shelikoff formed his company and formed a monopoly. All the other companies ceased operations.

Russian establishment in Alaska had several phases. First they were island hopping, then they discovered the various Aleutian Island groups, the Alaska Peninsula, Kodiak Island and then Sitka and other settlements east of Kodiak. This was a period of lawlessness. The Natives were abused. The Russian government heard about the abuses and in 1766 Catherine the Great decreed that this was to be a region under Russian sovereignty. She said the traders were to treat the Natives well but there was no apparatus to control the traders and their behavior. The government permitted Gregorii Shelikov's heirs and certain other companies to form the Russian American Company. It was to collect the furs on a monopoly basis. This was the end of the period of free exploitation of this region.

The Russian American Company goes through several phases. These are marked by several charters. There were three periods of about twenty years each. The first charter ran from 1799-1818, the second one from 1821-1844, and the third charter with extensions lasted until 1867. The first charter stated that the Company should have concern over the education of the Natives, keep order and refrain from abusing the Natives. Baronoff ruled the region under the first charter. He ruled with an iron hand. He was primarily concerned with making profits and getting furs. There was some effort to convert the Natives. There was a group of priests sent into the Kodiak region in 1794. It

was largely a period of informal rule. There were two major uprisings which wiped out Sitka (St. Michaels) which was rebuilt and Yakutat in 1805 which was abandoned. In 1821 the second charter was an attempt to exclude foreigners. They brought in contraband and traded liquor and ammunition for furs with the Natives. This caused an outcry in the commercial enterprises in the United States and Britain. Two conventions of 1824 and 1825 delineated the present Alaska boundary. The second charter ended in 1844 and was succeeded by another.

The status of the Natives under the charters: 1821 changed the administration from the conditions under Baranov's rule. The Natives had better treatment than previously. The governors were military men who were brought in for five years of service. The welfare of the Natives was part of their duties. Collection of furs was still their main concern. Any improvements of the conditions of the Natives were in the interest of the fur trade. The charter of 1821 attempted to distinguish between the various Native groups. The categories of islanders and the tribes in areas administered by the company were separated out. The charter of 1844 broke it down into dependent or settled tribes (Aleuts), the independent groups in the Interior, the coast independents and the semi-dependent groups (Tlingit), they were all considered vaguely as Russian subjects. Russian rule was extended only among the Aleuts. Another category was that of creoles. Both charters divided the full-blooded Natives and mixed descent. Native blood of any quantity determined if they were considered creole. They were considered what in Russia would be equal to commoners. The creoles had no duties or liabilities to the company unless they were educated at company expense. They had the same rights as the Russians. There were prejudices against the creoles. They identified themselves with the Russians. They were given the class of settlers. There were efforts to establish settlements for the creoles. Most of these didn't work out such as Nilichik and Kasilof.

The settled tribes were the Aleuts and Eskimos. The company felt they had to be overseen by the company. They were freed from taxes but there was compulsory labor. The company had them hunting sea otters. Property rights of the Natives were recognized such as their houses and gear. They were allowed to fish along the shores but they needed to get permission to leave the area. The company took the right to concentrate the Natives in larger groups. The independent groups were not interfered with by company rule. The colonial government could not extend its rule into their territory. The company was dependent on the independent and semi-dependents Natives for their food stuffs. The Natives were dependent on the company for trade goods such as tobacco, gun powder, lead, firearms, textiles and clothing. The Tlingit also started growing potatoes. Toward the end of the third charter the Russian government was becoming concerned about the company rule. In 1861 the serfs were freed in Russia. There was criticism about the company rule in Russian America. The Natives should not be under bondage either. The exertion of governmental authority was also criticized it was felt to be outmoded. It was felt that Russia ought to divest themselves of this possession. By disposing of it to the United States it would create an improved friendship between the United States and Russia. It was believed at that time that the United States would eventually take over all of North America.

A plan for a new charter was put forth which would have changed matters for the colonies. The Aleuts would no longer be under the obligation of labor to the company. They would be able to pick any place of residence. All inhabitants would be divided into

two groups: Russians and Natives. The class of creole would be discontinued and they would be considered colonists. The obligatory service of company-educated creoles was reduced to five years instead of fifteen years. Russian subjects and foreigners would be allowed to settle anywhere they wanted in the colonial territory. These recommendations were never put into effect.

Certain trends were occurring. There would have been a greater russification of the area. There was an increase in trade and the extended influence of the church. In 1844 the Russians established one Tlingit as toyon of all the Tlingit tribes near Sitka. The church was beginning to have more converts. The Natives in the Interior were becoming more acquainted with the Russians. The epidemics of the 1830s and 40s were much more deadly for the non-immunized Indians while the Russians and creoles fared better. This impressed upon the Tlingit the need for vaccinations. With time there might have been more governmental authority gradually put forth throughout Alaska.

The sale of Alaska was put through rather hastily. The land question gradually arose because of greater immigration of foreigners after 1867.

Richard asks the audience for any questions.

Audience comment: Earlier lecture talked about after 1867 when land speculators came in.

Richard: Most land speculations took place in Sitka. Elsewhere there were problems. He talks about some of the papers signed by Prince Maksutof which stated that certain tracks of land and the dwellings on them were not territory to be taken over by the United States.

Question: When Baranof and his men were in the Kodiak area and went into the Anchorage area did they take land?

Richard: Very little is known about Baranof and his group taking over land in that region. In the Cook Inlet area they had small trading posts for trade with the Natives.

Questions: Were the creoles the only ones in the little settlements in the western part of Alaska established for them?

Richard: There were also some elderly Russians also. The settlements were not successful. The creoles didn't care for the agriculture business.

Question: Comment about stories from the Natives about men being taken away and killed when the Russians came into the area around Kodiak.

Richard: Comments that he wishes this type of information was recorded. He has read stories about when Shelikof established a settlement the Natives rebelled and were taken out and speared and shot by the Russians. Some of the very old Natives in Yakutat have stories about their ancestors wiping out the Russian settlement.

Question: Asks about the settlement in Kenai area of Russian descendents.

Richard: The people in Homer are recent arrivals. After settling in Brazil they moved to Oregon before settling in Kenai.

Question: What was the growing influence at the end of the Russian period?

Richard: The influence of trade and the church were both exerting themselves.

Question: Are you familiar with the people who have done research on Russian Alaska?

Richard: There are about five who are studying Alaska history intensively. I have corresponded with Fedorova. There were plans to translate her work. They have quite a bit of material brought back to Russia from expeditions.

Question: Comment about remains of a Russian Fort on the shores of Lake Desmiak, in the Yukon Territory.

Richard: He said he was not familiar with the Lake. He said it probably wasn't built by the Russians as they were almost exclusively on the coast. Perhaps it was built by the Hudson Bay Company.

Question: What natural history observations did the Russians make?

Richard: They did quite a bit of collection. When they had their expeditions they had a scientist aboard like Langsdorf. He tried to collect in Alaska and when they went to California. In the 1820s they made drawings of the vegetation and Natives. Wazaninsky in the 1840s collected quite a few fossils. A lot of the collections were probably combined with other collections.