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Title: News Media and the Curious: Interpretive Archaeology at Colony Ross

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THE NEWS MEDIA AND THE CURIOUS:  
INTERPRETING ARCHAEOLOGY AT COLONY ROSS

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February 1992

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A Paper Presented at the Annual Meetings of the Society for California Archaeology, April,  
1992, Pasadena, California.

## Abstract

During Summer 1991, two large archaeological projects were undertaken at Fort Ross State Historic Park, located on the North Coast of California about 90 kilometers north of San Francisco. The Fort Ross Archaeological Project (FRAP), a multi-year investigation involving the University of California at Berkeley (UCB), conducted its third season of fieldwork at Fort Ross with an investigation focused primarily on the Native Alaskan residential area. Under the direction of Dr. Kent Lightfoot, the UCB crews conducted test excavations within the Alaskan village site, and surveys in the surrounding hinterland. The Russian Cemetery Restoration Project, a multi-year investigation involving the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee (UWM), conducted its second season of fieldwork, with crews under the direction of Dr. Lynne Goldstein locating and analyzing the remains of dozens of Russian and Native Alaskan settlers interred in the circa 1818-1841 cemetery. A major goal of the UWM project is to facilitate the eventual restoration of the historic cemetery, while the primary goal of the FRAP is to create a better understanding of the Native Alaskan presence at Colony Ross.

In order to share the findings of these projects with the general public, special interpretive needs were identified, including the necessity of working closely with the news media. Through a series of news releases and press packages, a great amount of excitement was generated among the news media, resulting in good coverage by the local, national, and international press. This paper will examine the Colony Ross archaeological program and discuss the manner in which it was presented to the news media, as well as the way in which they presented it to the general public. Special attention will be given to what worked and what did not work in the Archaeologist/Press relationship.

## THE NEWS MEDIA AND THE CURIOUS: INTERPRETING ARCHAEOLOGY AT COLONY ROSS

### Introduction

Colony Ross was established and utilized by the Russian-American Company from 1812-1841. The site of the colony is preserved today as Fort Ross State Historic Park (hereafter, FRSHP), an approximately 3,000-acre park located on California's North Coast. Founded in 1906, FRSHP is one of the oldest units of the California State Park System.

Since the 1950's, FRSHP has been the scene of numerous archaeological investigations. Most of the investigations were development-related mitigation projects, although recent excavations have been conducted in response to natural threats. In 1988, the Fort Ross Archaeological Project (hereafter, FRAP) was initiated. This ongoing project has involved the archaeological programs of the University of California at Berkeley, the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee, Sonoma State University, and Santa Rosa Junior College. The 1991 field season, involving the Berkeley and Milwaukee crews, was designed to maximize public interpretation. To accomplish this goal, special attention was paid to the news media. This paper will discuss how the FRAP was presented to the news media, and how they, in turn, presented it to the public.

### The Fort Ross Archaeological Project

The FRAP was initiated in 1988, when the archaeological field classes of Sonoma State University (hereafter, SSU), under the direction of Dr. David A. Fredrickson, the University of California at Berkeley (hereafter, UCB), under the direction of Dr. Kent Lightfoot, and Santa Rosa Junior College (hereafter, SRJC), under the direction of Thomas Origer, began excavations at FRSHP at the request of the author and the California Department of Parks and Recreation (hereafter, DPR). A research design was prepared by Kent Lightfoot (1988) that addressed the nature of prehistory along California's North Coast, and the resulting culture change brought about by the contact at Fort Ross of Russian, Native Alaskan, and Native Californian peoples.

In 1988, SSU's field class worked on the excavation of the prehistoric component of CA-SON-1454/H, a wind-eroded site located on the coastal terrace. In 1988 and 1989, SRJC conducted excavations at this same site, as well as at an adjacent prehistoric site, CA-SON-1453. In 1990, SRJC excavated CA-SON-670, the multi-component "Archy Camp" site. A major focus of these excavations was obsidian hydration and source analysis, and the refinement of an obsidian-generated chronological sequence for the coastal region.

In 1988, UCB began excavations at CA-SON-1898/H, the Native Alaskan Village site. Work continued at this site in 1989 and 1991 (Lightfoot et al. 1991). CA-SON-1998/H, located on the terrace adjacent to the Russian compound, is the remnants of the residential area inhabited by the Native Alaskan workers who accompanied the Russians to Colony Ross. Prior to 1988, no archaeological investigation had been made of this site. Excavations by UCB were initiated because of erosional impacts being felt by a portion of the site. An

underwater and terrestrial magnetometer survey was also initiated adjacent to the site in hopes of locating the Russian ship-building area (Allan 1991).

The University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee (hereafter, UWM), under the direction of Dr. Lynne Goldstein and Doctoral Candidate, Sannie Osborn, joined the FRAP in 1990, assisting DPR and the Russian Orthodox Church (hereafter, ROC) in an excavation leading to the restoration of the historic Russian Cemetery, CA-SON-1876H (Osborn and Goldstein 1989, 1991). UWM continued their excavations in 1991, and were assisted by forensic anthropologist, Dr. Douglas Owsley and crew from the Smithsonian Institution. Prior to 1990, the exact location of the cemetery was unknown. Since 1990, UWM has identified the cemetery boundaries and approximately 150 individual gravesites, the majority of which have been exposed and verified. Following each grave's verification, all human remains are being reburied with official 'last rites' by the ROC. At the conclusion of the project, each grave will be remarked with an historically-appropriate grave marker, and the cemetery will be restored to its historic appearance.

### Interpretation and the News Media

As archaeologists, we are becoming increasingly aware that we need to be doing more to reach the general public regarding the inherent values of our work and profession. We are realizing that we need to be interpreters. Interpretation is an important aspect of the DPR. In the Department's "Mission Statement," it is stated that,

The function of the California State Park and Recreation Commission and the Department of Parks and Recreation is to acquire, protect, develop, and interpret for the inspiration, use, and enjoyment of the people of the State a balanced system of areas of outstanding scenic, recreational, and historic importance. These areas shall be held in trust as irreplaceable portions of California's natural and historic heritage.

Thus, the interpretation of cultural resources within the DPR is mandated by Departmental policy and good common sense. With this in mind, it was decided prior to the FRAP's 1991 field season to use the project as a way of educating the public about Colony Ross, and creating a better appreciation for archaeology. Although FRSHP receives about 200,000 visitors a year, it is a relatively-remote and isolated park. In order to maximize our contact with the public, we decided to contact the news media, and involve them in our work. We felt that the FRAP was one of local, national, and international significance, and we felt that Summer 1991 summit between Presidents Bush and Gorbachev might create a special interest on the part of the news media in the FRAP. In spite of the sensitivity of our project, especially its cemetery-restoration aspect, we decided to proceed with our plans to share the FRAP with the news media and the public. We felt that there was an ethical reason to do so since the FRAP involved publicly-owned resources. Furthermore, we identified four advantages that might result from our efforts:

1. The FRAP could be used to educate the public about the history of Colony Ross.

2. The FRAP could also be used to educate the public about the values of archaeology.
3. News media coverage of the FRAP could provide advertisement for FRSHP, and a positive public-relations image for the DPR, as well as the University of California, Berkeley, and the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee.
4. Finally, news media coverage of the FRAP could help control and dispel rumors and misconceptions of the project, especially the cemetery restoration work.

### Preparations

Prior to developing an interpretive plan for the FRAP, this author sought support for the idea among the various principals of the project. Dr. Kent Lightfoot of UCB, Dr. Lynne Goldstein and Sannie Osborn of UWM, Dr. Glenn Farris and John Foster of DPR, various park managers, rangers, and interpreters, ROC priests, the Sonoma County Deputy Coroner, and members of the Native Alaskan and Native Californian communities were all consulted, and their opinions solicited. Everyone thought that if handled correctly, the sharing of the FRAP with the news media and public could be a positive and beneficial experience for all. We decided to proceed with the planning.

During Spring Semester 1991, SSU student Michael Woods, then a Graduate Student Intern with DPR, assisted the author in the preparation of an interpretive plan for FRAP's Summer 1991 field season involving UWM's continuing excavation of the Russian Cemetery, and UCB's continuing excavation of the Native Alaskan Village. A list of local, San Francisco Bay area, and Sacramento area newspapers, and radio and television stations was prepared. All of the local news media were included on the list, as were the major Bay Area and Sacramento papers and stations. At the same time, we prepared a one page News Release to send to the news media. The News Release presented a brief description of the FRAP, gave the dates of the project, and announced two official "Press Days," to be held in July and August, to correspond with the UWM and UCB projects, respectively. It was decided to have 10:00 AM - 2:00 PM as official hours for the two Press Days.

In order to safeguard against the press showing up on the first day of the project, and becoming bored with the routine activity of setting-up the base camp, etc., we decided to cheat a bit on our project dates: on the News Release we showed the beginning and ending dates a few days later and earlier, respectively, than they actually were. In other words, if a reporter intended to "scoop" everyone else, and arrived at FRSHP on the first day of the project, we could ensure that there would be something of interest to report, as we would have begun our work several days earlier. It was a fear of mine that a reporter would arrive during our set-up or take-down times, and in boredom, write an inaccurate and romantic version of the FRAP.

Brian Hickey, the Chief Ranger for FRSHP, and the author were listed as the official contacts for the Project. The News release was mailed out during the second week of June, just prior to the initiation of the UWM fieldwork.

As the first News release was being mailed out, Michael Woods and I were busy preparing a second Release, to be sent to those representatives of the press who called and requested additional information, and to those attending the official Press Days. The second Release was 1 1/2 pages in length, and was attached to a "Press Package." The Package included a park brochure, information about the Fort Ross Interpretive Association, and FRAP background articles written by a number of participants. The latter consisted of two overviews by Dr. Glenn Farris, one concerning FRSHP, and the other, the history of archaeology at the park; an overview of the Russian Cemetery investigation by Dr. Lynne Goldstein and Sannie Osborn; an overview of the UCB project by Dr. Kent Lightfoot; a statement of support for the cemetery restoration effort by Reverend Vladimir Derugin of the ROC; and an overview of the Fort Ross Interpretive Association by Association President John Middleton. These various articles ranged from 2-6 pages in length, and when combined, consisted of 19 pages of double-spaced type. Each Press Package was assembled, and enclosed in a manilla envelope.

## Results

Upon receiving the first News Release, the San Francisco Chronicle and the Examiner prepared brief articles based on the Release. One of these articles was apparently picked-up by the wire service and published elsewhere, including the Washington Post. Others decided not to wait until the official Press Days to find out more about the FRAP. Within a day or so of receiving the Release, KGO Radio of San Francisco called FRSHP and did an on-the-air interview with State Park Ranger Bill Walton, and KSRO Radio of Santa Rosa called and interviewed the author. We had designated official contacts so as to control the accuracy of what was being reported by the news media. However, this did not always work as we had hoped it would. Fortunately, in the case of Ranger Walton, we had someone intimately aware of the FRAP, and so we did not suffer from the live interview. I had feared that the press might call the park and interview someone only remotely aware of the Project. The problem with such a situation was that it might have led to inaccurate information being disseminated to the public, and could have blown-up on us, given the sensitive nature of the FRAP. Fortunately, there were no miscommunications and no explosions.

Prior to the official Press Days, KCRA TV of Sacramento requested permission to visit the FRAP and prepare a news piece for their "Special Assignment" newscast segment. Permission was granted - it is always wise to grant the press permission to do something they can otherwise do without your permission! - and a 2-man news team visited Fort Ross in order to cover the cemetery restoration of Dr. Goldstein's UWM team. I arranged to have a number of principals available for interviews, and guaranteed photo opportunities of the UWM crew at work. On-site for interviews besides myself were Dr. Goldstein, Ranger Dan Murley, and Maintenance Supervisor Bill Mennell. The KCRA reporter was impressed with how organized we were when it came to accommodating the news media,

and I was surprised to learn toward the end of the day that he thought I was a Public Information Officer for DPR! He was surprised when I told him that I was an archaeologist. All-in-all, the day went well with the TV camera on-site. There were a few unexpected glitches, though. For example, Bill Mennell was delayed arriving at the site, thus I could not introduce him when the TV crew arrived. I had designated Bill as the main DPR interviewee as he was the staff person most intimately involved with the cemetery project. In the meantime, the TV crew decide that the lighting will be better after lunch, and so depart to obtain some panoramic film of the cemetery setting. I expected them to return for the scheduled interviews at 1:00 PM. At about 3:00 PM, I had to go in search of the crew, finding them elsewhere in the park shooting film of the reconstructed Russian compound. By then, Bill Mennell was in need of returning to his office, so I encouraged the crew to return to the cemetery. I suggested that they interview Bill, and explained that he had been the saving grace of the project, as he had been responsible for getting us the necessary equipment and maintenance support which we desperately needed. The TV crew misunderstood, and thought that I was rewarding Bill by having him interviewed on TV. They said that they would rather interview someone knowledgeable about the project. When I informed them that Bill fit this category - and it should be noted that the TV crew still thought I was a Public Information Officer - they balked, and said that they would only interview one of us, Bill or myself. When I told them to interview Bill, they gave in, and interviewed the two of us, as well as Dr. Goldstein. Although Bill gave a good interview, it did not appear on TV, having not survived the station's editing. The Special Assignment on Fort Ross appeared as a 2-part special on KCRA the next two nights. Each segment was about three minutes in length, the first on the cemetery restoration project, and the second on the park itself. In the second segment, the reporter set the stage for the upcoming UCB investigation of the Native Alaskan Village. The two part segment on Fort Ross was picked up by various NBC affiliates across the country, and aired over the next couple of days. A friend wrote from Indiana to say that he had seen the piece at the top of his local newscast.

The KCRA reporter also disclosed that on the following day, priests of the ROC would be at Fort Ross in order to rebury the individuals unearthed at the cemetery. In fact, that was the truth, although we had not planned on announcing it to the public. We anticipated the disclosure would result in lots of visitors, but only a few showed up to witness the reburial ceremony.

On July 9, 1991, we held our first official Press Day. It was held at the Russian Cemetery, and highlighted the UWM project underway there at the time. On-site for interviews were a host of principals: Dr. Goldstein, Ranger Murley, Dr. Glenn Farris, Deputy Coroner Tom Siebe, FRIA President John Middleton, and Reverend Derugin of the ROC. The official hours for the Press Day were 10:00 AM - 2:00 PM, but at 10:00, the press were all there. A crew from KGO TV of San Francisco was in attendance, as were the reporters of a number of local newspapers. Everything went well, and the press did a number of interviews with different principals. KGO TV asked to film an open grave, with a burial being exposed, something we had thought we would not allow. We did allow it, but requested that Reverend Derugin be shown with the archaeologist, observing her work. Reverend Derugin agreed with this proposal, as did the TV crew. The TV station aired a short segment on the nightly newscast that same day. The various newspaper articles came



out the following week, and they all proved to be accurate and positive. Everyone attending the Press day received a Press Package. The TV crew apparently left their's at the site, although the newspaper reporters appeared happy with their's. At least one of them informed me later that the Press Package had been helpful in the preparation of her article on the project.

Living History Day, an annual interpretive event at FRSHP, attracted the interest of the news media in late July. We were contacted by World Monitor, the TV news program carried internationally on the Discovery Channel, who requested an opportunity to visit FRSHP and cover the FRAP. When I asked how they had become aware of the FRAP, Gaynelle Evans, the Producer of World Monitor, told me that she had read something about it in the Washington Post. Evans, veteran reporter, Robert Pierpoint, and a 2-person film crew, arrived the day before Living History Day, and conducted interviews with Ranger Murley and myself. The cemetery project was concluded for the season, so it was not possible to film its excavation. However, the Berkeley crew was beginning their excavation of the Native Alaskan Village, so World Monitor was able to film the excavation of a preliminary test unit, and the wet-wash operation associated with it. On the next day, they filmed the interpretive event, which included canon and musket-firing, folk dancing and music, blacksmithing, candle-making, etc. A five minute segment was aired on World Monitor that same week, and it included my interview about the FRAP, as well as footage of the UCB excavation and wet-wash.

Living History Day was also attended by TV crews other than World Monitor. In attendance were crews from Finnish TV and Moscow TV, and PBS' California Gold program. Although the Finns and Russians were only interested in the interpretive event, California Gold did show an interest in the FRAP. A 15-minute segment on Fort Ross was shown on California Gold, and broadcast to all 13 PBS affiliates in California. The segment showed lots of the Living History Day events, and included an interview with me concerning FRAP and Russian-American history.

A second Press Day was held on August 7, 1991, and coincided with the UCB project at the Native Alaskan Village. This second Press Day had been noted in both of the News Release mailings sent out or distributed in June. Although I had considered sending out a third News Release so as to remind the news media of the second Press Day, I did not. I hoped that they would remember it and attend. One week prior to the second Press Day, I did send out copies of the first two News Releases to members of the national and international press, such as CNN, Associated Press, New York Times, Newsweek Magazine, and U.S. News and World Report. With the U.S./U.S.S.R. summit underway, I hoped that the arrival of the News Releases, and the Russian-American nature of the FRAP, might generate an interest in attending the Press Day. It did not.

On August 7, Dr. Lightfoot had the UCB students prepared for an expected inundation of news media types. The inundation did not occur. Although the students, many of them sporting "Cal" hats and shirts, were prepared to answer a host of questions, and participate in photo opportunities, the second Press Day passed almost without notice. Reporters from three or four of the small local newspapers were in attendance again, but there was no participation by the larger news media organizations. The local papers did a wonderful

job, though. The reporters were delighted to have access to an archaeological project, and their enthusiasm generated a rewarding dialogue with the archaeologists. Once again, when the local papers published the Fort Ross stories, we were all pleased with their accuracy and positive nature. Although there were no TV stations or larger news media organizations in attendance, the second Press Day had been a success. Some of the students were a bit disappointed, though. They had instructed family and friends to watch for them on the evening news.

There were numerous visitors to the FRAP. Many came out of curiosity, after first reading about the project in their local newspaper, or seeing it on television. Others happened upon the project while visiting the park. In all cases that I am aware of, the visitors were pleased with the project, and fascinated by what we were finding. Students were instructed to be friendly to the visitors, and answer their questions if at all possible. The UWM students, however, were cautioned about talking too much about burials and artifacts, given the sensitive nature of that aspect of the project. Visitors at the Russian Cemetery were controlled a bit more than those at the Native Alaskan Village site. At the Cemetery, visitors were usually directed to either Dr. Goldstein or myself, whereas at the Village, they were met and guided around by students assigned to daily interpretive duties.

There were a number of visitors who stood out. A motorcycle club decided to hold a "run" to Fort Ross in order to visit the Cemetery excavation. There were about 30 motorcyclists in the group, and I gave them an in-depth tour of the project. They asked good questions, and showed a lot of interest in the FRAP. On another day, a carload of Catholic priests visited the Cemetery. Numerous families visited with their children, and often there would be one child who had expressed an interest in studying archaeology. The Cemetery received more visitors who came to the park for the express purpose of visiting the FRAP, whereas the Village received a larger number of accidental tourists, those people who happened upon the project while visiting the park.

### Conclusions

Working with the news media and the public at Fort Ross was a positive and fun experience. If we had it to do over again, I am certain that we would do so with very few changes.

We might lessen or even delete the Press Package, since it did not seem to be useful to many of the newspaper reporters, and to none of the TV reporters. In fact, whereas we had anticipated thorough and well-researched articles and film stories, what we got was somewhat less. While the small local newspapers did a good and thorough job of reporting, the larger papers seemed to rely solely on the original News Release, and the TV stations, given their fast visual medium, looked for glitzy spots of interest. But with our hard work and planning, we were able to control the glitz and thus ensure an acceptable final product.

We found that the single most important aspect of working with the news media was the preparation and distribution of the News Release. The Release is the "bait on the hook," so to speak, and it is the step that makes or breaks the whole process of working with the news media. It has to be brief enough to allow for its reading, yet contain enough basic

information to generate interest. It requires a concise description of the project, dates of the project, names of the principals, information on how and when to visit the project, and contacts for further information.

We also found that having someone assigned and prepared to greet the public paid off. The public liked the idea that we liked them visiting. Some people entered the site looking as if they expected us to run them off, but when we approached to greet them, and asked if they would like a tour of the project, they quickly smiled. A lot of what we were doing and finding could have been difficult for the public to see and appreciate, but we were fortunate to have archaeologists and students who could take the time to interpret the stones and bones in such a way that the past might take shape and be seen clearly.

From the perspective of the FRAP, I would like to offer the following observations:

1. First, and most importantly, people appreciate archaeology! John and Jane Q. Public are interested in it, and they want an opportunity to actually see it. People respond when they know that they are welcome to visit archaeological projects. People come out of the same inherent curiosity that brought each and every one of us to this profession. We are all curious about our past. As archaeologists, we help them to better understand the past, and thus they appreciate the present. The contribution our profession makes to society is validated everytime parents bring their children to an archaeological dig in order to educate them.
2. The News Media is interested in archaeology, providing you make it accessible to them. By making it easy, with news releases advertising plenty of on-site interviews and photo opportunities, they should respond.
3. Through the news media, people interested in archaeology will be reached, and those less aware of it will be sensitized to its value. "If it's on TV, or in the paper, it's got to be true, and it's got to be important" seems to be the motto of American Society. Seeing archaeology in print or on the tv screen seems to legitimize it for many people. And seeing local archaeology is important, too, as it helps to build stronger support for local preservation efforts, and dispels the myth that archaeology is restricted to Egypt or Greece.
4. Working with the news media takes a lot of hard work and planning but it is well worth the effort. And it can be fun, too!

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