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Murder, Massacre, and Mayhem on the California Coast, 1814–1815: Newly Translated Russian American Company Documents Reveal Company Concern Over Violent Clashes

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The Lone Woman of San Nicolas Island, whose solitary 18-year stay on an island off the coast of southern California was commemorated in Scott O'Dell's novel, Island of the Blue Dolphins, has been of considerable interest since she was abandoned on the island in 1835 and brought to Santa Barbara in 1853. We examine one of the factors that may have contributed to the Lone Woman's abandonment and discuss several newly-translated Russian American Company (RAC) documents, one of which gives details of a long-rumored deadly conflict between a Russian-led crew of Alaskan native otter hunters and the San Nicolas Island natives (Nicoleño). All three documents contain important new information about the nature of the sometimes violent interactions between the Spanish, Russians, Americans, California Indians, and Alaskan natives in the early nineteenth century.

MORE THAN 160 YEARS HAVE PASSED SINCE the last native representative of the Nicoleño lived on San Nicolas Island. And in that time, many newspaper, magazine, and academic journal articles, along with fiction and non-fiction works, have been written about the life of the solitary Nicoleño who died at the Santa Barbara home of George and Sinforosa Nidever in October 1853 after just seven weeks on the California mainland.

While the account of the Lone Woman's abandonment on San Nicolas Island and her passage to

Santa Barbara is certainly compelling, the deeper historic context is complex and equally fascinating. Unfortunately, errors and exaggerations about the Lone Woman and particularly about the historic events that took place on San Nicolas Island prior to, and including her stranding, have crept into much of the existing literature. A majority of writers in the popular press as well as some scholarly publications have used information from secondary sources and reported it as fact. Emma Hardacre's 'wild romance' for *Scribner's*

Monthly (Hardacre 1880:657–664) is an example, in which details derived from still-living event participants, such as George Nidever, are incorporated into her feature on the Lone Woman along with information from what she refers to as “ancient manuscripts”—specifically, an error-riddled account from the November 1856 issue of the *Santa Barbara Gazette* (Hardacre 1880:658; Heizer and Elsasser 1961:28–29).¹

To better comprehend the historic setting of the Lone Woman events, efforts were made to understand the perspectives and priorities of the various cultural groups (Spanish, Russian, American, Mexican, English, California Indian, and Alaskan native) who came into contact in southern California during the early part of the nineteenth century. A review of Russian archival literature led to previously unreported (in English) primary source documents that recounted a series of dramatic incidents on the California coast during this period. Several records described RAC (Russian America Company) otter hunting activities on San Nicolas Island from 1814 to 1819, as well as interactions of crew members with the Spanish on the mainland. Three documents were translated into English for this project, and they gave specifics about a long-rumored violent conflict between a Russian otter hunting crew and the Nicoleño that took place in 1814. This altercation set events in motion that could have created the context for the removal of all but one of the natives from the island in November 1835 (Dittman 1878; Ellison 1984:80–89; Heizer and Elsasser 1961).²

From these documents we found that the fate of the Lone Woman may have been unexpectedly tied to the business activities of the RAC, and in particular, to the sea otter hunting ventures of a vessel named the *Il'mena*, owned and operated by the RAC from 1813 (Khlebnikov 1973:87; Tikhmenev 1978:149–150) until she wrecked off of the California coast at Point Arena in June 1820 (Khlebnikov 1990:42). The RAC was a private mercantile enterprise operating under government oversight, with monopolistic rights to the fur trade in Russian possessions along the north Pacific. One of the RAC vessels that made frequent visits to the California coast on Company business was the *Il'mena*, a two-masted, 200-ton brig originally named the *Lydia* (Tikhmenev 1978:149–150). The *Lydia*, owned by Thomas Lyman and Associates of Boston as of 1804 (Farris 2012:97), was sold

by American Captain James Bennett to the RAC Chief Administrator, Alexander Andreevich Baranov, in 1813 (Khlebnikov 1973:87).

As was common practice in the early 1800s with the perennially short-staffed RAC, Baranov hired another American sea captain, William Wadsworth, to take the *Il'mena* on her first voyage on behalf of the Company. The ship left Sitka, Alaska in either December 1813 (Khlebnikov 1973:88) or January 1814 (Ogden 1941:165). On board the ship was a complement of perhaps 25 *baidarkas* (kayaks), 50 Alaskan native hunters and Creoles (Ogden 1941:165), with Russian *promyshlenniki* (fur traders) Timofei Nikitich Tarakanov and Iakov Babin as overseers (Istomin et al. 2005:267–270).³

As a result of the voyages of the *Il'mena* and two supplementary support vessels, the American-owned *Pedler* and *Forester*, from 1814–1819, violent incidents, including murder, massacre, and mayhem, were reported to have occurred. These events involved RAC employees who were on San Nicolas Island and on the California coast. Details of these dramatic encounters are described in the newly-translated RAC documents.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Three Russian American Company documents were selected for translation into English because they described events involving RAC otter hunting groups on San Nicolas Island prior to the abandonment of the Lone Woman in 1835. The documents coincidentally featured the activities of the RAC ship, *Il'mena*, from 1814 to 1819. The ship was uniquely connected to San Nicolas Island (Fig. 1), which the RAC considered belonged to no nation (Dmytryshyn et al. 1989:332). During the second decade of the nineteenth century, the Russians referred to San Nicolas Island as Il'men' or Il'mena (Istomin et al. 2005: 268, 240 map; Pierce 1984:xi). It is likely that the name came from a Russian lake in the Novgorod Oblast': Lake Il'men' (B. Dralyuk, personal communication 2012).⁴

The three documents selected for this project were written by different authors for different purposes, describing separate but related events that took place on San Nicolas Island during the second decade of the nineteenth century. The first document is an explanatory note dated July 15, 1818, written by Ivan Alexandrovich

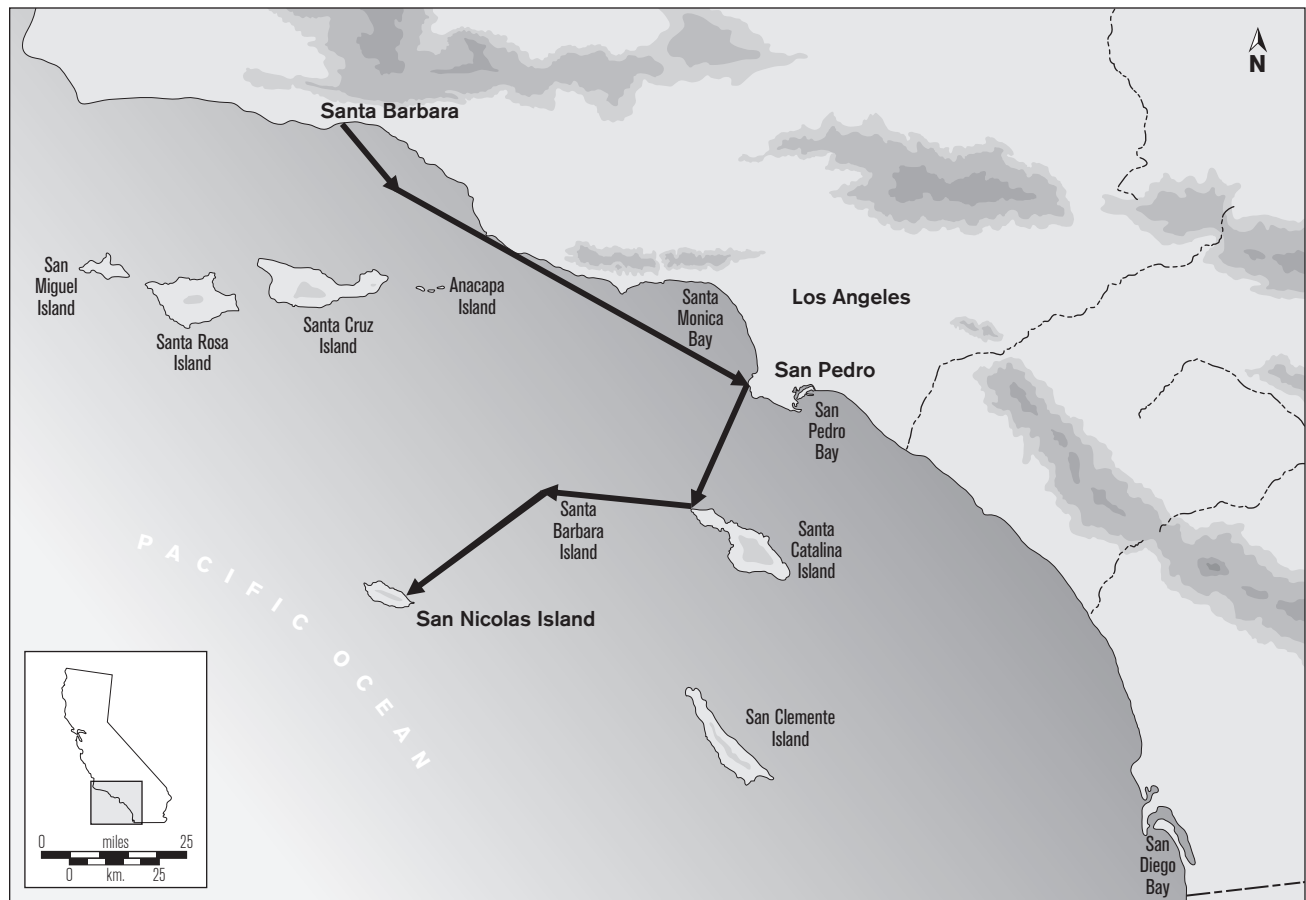


Figure 1. California coast and the Channel Islands with the *baidarka* (kayak) route (black line) taken by two Alaskan natives paddling to San Nicolas Island, 1816 or 1817 (Document 2). The Russians initially referred to San Nicolas Island as Il'men'.

Kuskov, administrator at Fort Ross, the RAC colonial outpost in California, in response to a demand for an explanation from Leontii Andreianovich Hagemeister, Chief Administrator of the RAC, from January 11, 1818–October 24, 1818 (Pierce 1984:11) about a possible massacre that involved RAC hunters. Kuskov's note gives details of a violent altercation that took place on San Nicolas Island in 1814 between the Nicoleño and the Alaskan native otter hunters under the command of RAC employee Iakov Babin. Hagemeister asked Kuskov to send Babin to Sitka (Alaska), along with testimony of others involved in the event, so that Babin could be held accountable for his responsibility in the affair. Babin was to travel to the Main Office of the RAC in St. Petersburg for an inquest into the altercation (Pierce 1984:138–139).

The second document, dated May 1819, is the deposition or testimony of an Alaskan native otter hunter,

Ivan Kyglaiia, who was a member of a hunting party on San Nicolas Island in 1815, and was witness to an unusually gruesome incident while he was a Spanish captive in southern California (Fig. 2). Kyglaiia's group, under the direction of RAC employee Boris Tarasov, went from San Nicolas Island in 1815 to the mainland and was captured by the Spanish at San Pedro. Kyglaiia's testimony presents an eyewitness account of the cruel treatment he and a fellow Kodiak Island native, Chukagnak, experienced at the hands of a priest and California Indian neophytes under his direction. Kyglaiia tells of Chukagnak's death from torture by their captors. While Kyglaiia's account has been repeated and paraphrased by many authors (Dmytryshyn et al. 1989:332–334; Farris 1990, 2012:128–132; Pierce 1990:397–398; Tikhmenev 1978:138), Kyglaiia's verbatim testimony is translated here into English in its entirety.

The final document of the three is summarized here rather than included as a full translation. It is an excerpt

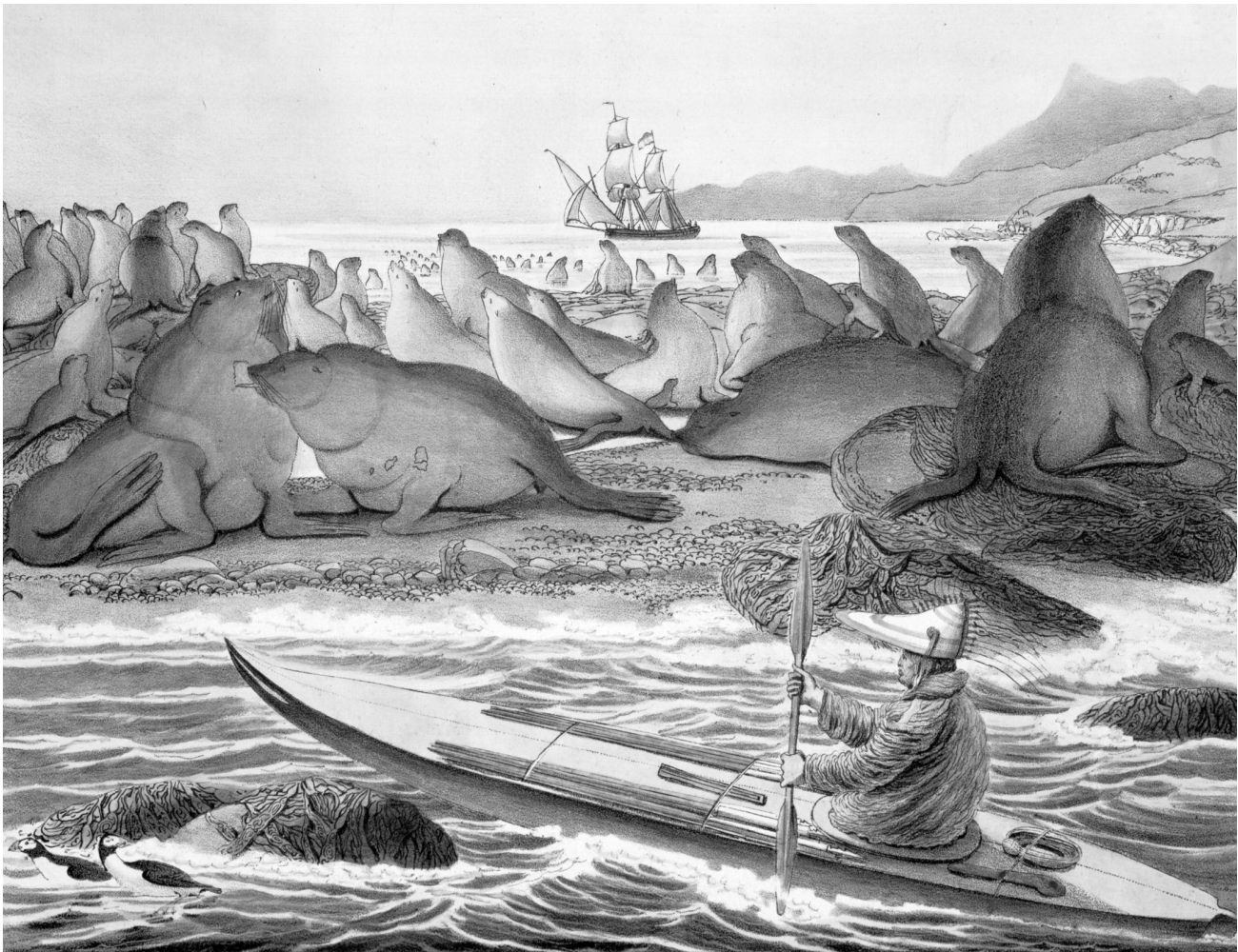


Figure 2. Russian brig *Rurik* anchors at St. Paul Island, while Alaskan native hunter paddles in baidarka near sea lions, by Louis Choris, 1817. Alaska State Library, Louis Choris Collection, P139-48.

(September 18 to October 1) from the 1815 travel journal of Antipatr Alexandrovich Baranov, the son of then-Chief Administrator of the RAC, Alexander Andreevich Baranov. Baranov's journal is not a ship's log but rather a personal record of dates and events that occurred while he was on board the *Il'mena* cruising along the central California coast and the Channel Islands. His entries include the capture of RAC employees, including an American. Baranov also notes that he received a letter on September 27 about the capture of Boris Tarasov and otter hunters in San Pedro, and he gives details of a visit to San Nicolas Island where the *Il'mena* retrieved the remainder of the otter hunting group on October 1, 1815.

All three documents exist as contemporaneous handwritten copies, rather than originals, in the Manuscript Division of the Russian State Library, Moscow.

Two of these documents are also available on microfilm, as part of the Leonid Shur collection of Russian sources on American history, in the Elmer E. Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska-Fairbanks (Shur 1990:17–18, roll 21, N 143 Kuskov Papers). The documents were first published in Russian in 2005 by Alexei Istomin, James Gibson, and Valery Tishkov (Istomin et al. 2005:237–241, 267–270, 318–320).

These RAC documents were translated into English by native Russian-speaking graduate student Irina Vladi L. Wender, with contributions by Boris Dralyuk. In keeping with customary practice, the text of the documents has been lightly edited and modernized in order to make it more understandable to the contemporary English reader, while the style and tone, and particularly the content, has been maintained. A modified version of

the American Library Association-Library of Congress system of Romanization of Slavic alphabets was used to render Russian place names and personal names, including those for Alaskan natives, into English.

Place names in the English translations of the first two documents have been changed to modern equivalents so that readers can easily identify locations: Novo-Arkhangel'sk became Sitka (Alaska), Kad'iak became Kodiak Island, Port Rumiantsov became Bodega Bay, the island of Climant became San Clemente Island, the island of Catharine became Santa Catalina Island, the island of Barbara became Santa Barbara Island, and the island Il'men' became San Nicolas Island. The names of the Kodiak Island villages that were the home territory of the Alaskan natives recorded in Doc. 2 have been modified to reflect the original native names: Kashkak, Kaguyak, Mysovskoe, and Chiniak (Luehrmann 2008:24, Map 1; Osborn 1997).

The dates in the documents are as recorded in the original Julian or old style calendar system, which was 12 days behind the current Gregorian or new style calendar during that time period. However, in the Russian American colonies, the dates were actually only 11 days behind the Gregorian dates due to their location and lack of an established International Date Line at the time (Pierce 1984:iv).

The documents occur in the order of the events they describe (earliest to latest), rather than by the calendar date of the communication. They give details of incidents that occurred along the California coast beginning in 1814, and trace the activities of RAC employees and hunters through to the spring of 1819. All three of the documents contain references to RAC activities on San Nicolas Island (Table 1).

TRANSLATIONS

The letter that precipitated the explanatory note by Ivan Kuskov was written by Leontii Hagemeister, dated January 28, 1818, as communication No. 24, and translated into English by Richard Pierce (Pierce 1984:11). Hagemeister's missive covered many topics, and was the first sent to Kuskov after Hagemeister assumed the position of Chief Administrator of the RAC colonial enterprise on January 11 of that year. One of the instructions that Hagemeister issued was the following:

Please send here, under close guard, the fur hunter Iakov Babin, whose actions on Il'mena Island may have been known to you. At the same time, furnish an explanation as to whether the events on Il'mena Island were known, and if so, why he was not sent here before, and also why (if you knew!) you did not tell me when I was there as an auditor.⁵

Hagemeister, a Captain-Lieutenant in the Russian Navy, visited Fort Ross in 1817 while traveling onboard the ship *Kutuzov*. He had been ordered by the RAC Main Office to observe operations at Fort Ross and to assess the effectiveness of RAC Chief Administrator Alexander Baranov in Sitka, and to take the place of Baranov as head of the enterprise if he felt it was warranted (Tikhmenev 1978:139).

Document 1

Explanatory note of I. A. Kuskov to the Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Colonies in America L. A. Hagemeister concerning the investigation of fur trader I. Babin.⁶

Ross, July 15, 1818.

Copy

Your High Nobleness

Dear Sir Leontii Andreevich:

Per your instruction No. 24 dated January 28, 1818 from Sitka, as is my duty to explain the incident concerning the fur trader Iakov Babin, which took place on San Nicolas Island. Upon his arrival in 1814 with the ship *Il'mena* from Sitka, fur trader Babin was to stay with the Tarakanov hunting party. However, Tarakanov had ordered him to stay behind on San Nicolas Island with some canoes, while the rest of the Tarakanov party went on to stay on San Clemente Island.

In August of 1814 an American ship *Pedler* landed at San Clemente Island from Sitka under the command of Mr. Hunt. The ship carried goods that were in the custody of the company associate Mr. Nepogod'ev. The cargo comprised provisions for the colony and Fort Ross, as well as goods to be sold to Commissioner Elliot, his assistant, and the Tarakanov hunting party. As per the arrangements previously made with Mr. Hunt in Sitka, the entire cargo was to remain in Bodega Bay and *Pedler* was to pick up another cargo in Bodega Bay for delivery to Sitka. If, however, the ship *Il'mena* was absent, Mr. Hunt was to go on to California, seek out the *Il'mena*, and deliver the cargo to the ship. From there, the *Pedler* was not to stop at Bodega Bay but, as agreed, sail on to Sitka. There, Mr. Hunt was supposed to receive some sea otters. In April of 1814, I received some letters from Mr. Elliot, which were delivered to me from the port

Table 1
EVENTS ON SAN NICOLAS ISLAND, 1814–1819

Date	Location	Ship/Flag	Events
1814			
January	Sitka, Alaska	<i>Il'mena</i> /Russia	Leaves Alaska for California with William Wadsworth as captain and Russian Timofei Tarakanov in command of RAC otter hunting crew. ¹
June	Sitka, Alaska	<i>Pedler</i> /U.S.	Leaves Alaska for California with Wilson Price Hunt to deliver supplies to the <i>Il'mena</i> and to pick up otter pelts; <i>Pedler</i> does not find <i>Il'mena</i> in Bodega Bay, heads for San Clemente Island. ¹
August	San Clemente Island (SCLI)	<i>Pedler</i> /U.S. <i>Il'mena</i> /Russia	Arrives on SCLI and finds <i>Il'mena</i> with Tarakanov and large otter hunting group; Tarakanov takes supplies and gives otter pelts to Il'ia Nepogod'ev. ¹
Before Aug. 26	San Nicolas Island (SNI)	<i>Pedler</i> /U.S.	Arrives on SNI but Iakov Babin, RAC fur hunter, and otter hunting crew are not on SNI; some have gone to hunt on Catalina Island. ¹
			Nepogod'ev retrieves otter pelts left with SNI natives; he learns that one of Babin's hunters was killed by the natives, and the remaining hunters killed many islanders. ¹
	California	<i>Pedler</i> /U.S. <i>Il'mena</i> /Russia	<i>Pedler</i> is captured by a Spanish ship (<i>Tagle</i>) near San Luis Obispo, and released on September 10; <i>Pedler</i> leaves California for Sitka, takes report on SNI incident from Ivan Kuskov, Fort Ross manager, to RAC chief manager, Alexander Baranov; <i>Il'mena</i> goes to the coast of California to trade. ¹
1815			
April	Bodega Bay	<i>Il'mena</i> /Russia	While at Bodega Bay, Babin is demoted and then fired by Tarakanov; Babin is replaced by Boris Tarasov. ¹
	San Nicolas Island	<i>Forester</i> /U.S.	<i>Forester</i> under William Pigot takes Tarasov's group with <i>baidarkas</i> to SNI; one of the hunters is Kodiak Ivan Kyglaia; Tarasov leads the group to Santa Rosa Island and Catalina Island before stopping in San Pedro. ²
September	San Pedro		Tarasov's hunting group stays in San Pedro; the group is ambushed by Spanish soldiers, who confiscate their possessions and take the captives to the pueblo of Los Angeles ²
			Kyglaia and Kodiak native, Chukagnak, stay in jail in Los Angeles while Tarasov and the others are sent to Santa Barbara, then transferred to Monterey. ^{2,3}
Date unknown			Kyglaia reports that a priest and others try to get Kyglaia and Chukagnak to convert to Catholicism, but they refuse; Chukagnak is tortured and killed; a note arrives, Kyglaia is spared and sent to Santa Barbara. ²
September 27	Central California coast	<i>Il'mena</i> /Russia	Note informs the <i>Il'mena</i> that Tarasov and crew, with 13 <i>baidarkas</i> , have been captured at San Pedro and sent to Monterey. ³
October 1	San Nicolas Island	<i>Il'mena</i> /Russia	Arrives on SNI and retrieves Tarakanov's hunting group, including two Kodiak women. ³
Date unknown	Santa Barbara		Kyglaia does not find Tarasov and the otter hunters; meets Kodiak native Philip Atash'sha; they escape by paddling in a <i>baidarka</i> to SNI. ²
Abt. 1817–1819	San Nicolas Island		Kyglaia and Atash'sha live on SNI with assistance from natives while waiting for a Russian crew or vessel; Atash'sha dies after a year. ²
1819			
Spring	San Nicolas Island	<i>Il'mena</i> /Russia	Kyglaia is taken to Fort Ross in May where he is interviewed by Kuskov through two Alaskan native <i>taion</i> (chief) interpreters. ²

Details are from translations of Documents 1, 2, 3

of San Francisco. From the information contained in these letters, I was expecting the return of the *Il'mena* to Bodega Bay as early as June, but no later than July. As such, I began to have concerns about the safety of the ship. I also began to suspect that something had delayed the ship's arrival at Bodega Bay. If the ship was delayed, Mr. Hunt's ship would not meet the *Il'mena* and its hunting party, which would then force him to return the cargo to Sitka. This would cause all kinds of disturbances in business operations. With

this in mind, I decided to request the following from Mr. Hunt: if he does not find the *Il'mena* at the coast of California, he should try and locate the ship, take the *Il'mena* people and the Tarakanov hunting party as well. Then, deliver them along with the goods to Bodega Bay.

I also requested the following of Mr. Hunt: if the *Il'mena* has come to Bodega Bay, Mr. Hunt is to leave the goods designated for Tarakanov's party only, and receive for them one thousand small sea otters. As it

happened, the *Pedler* left the aforementioned Bodega Bay and located the *Il'mena* at San Clemente Island. He learned that the *Il'mena* had gone from California to Bodega Bay. That according to the orders I gave Hunt, the entire cargo that was on the *Pedler* was supposed to be immediately deposited at Bodega Bay for the commercial production and the hunting party. Tarakanov took the whole ship cargo, for which he had no authority, and thereby caused a considerable amount of disturbance. Tarakanov also gave the company associate Nepogod'ev a number of sea otters which his party had procured.

From there, the *Pedler* went on to San Nicolas Island where Babin and the rest of the hunting party were staying. But Babin was not on the island. As it happened, he took a few men in some canoes and went to Santa Catalina Island. Nepogod'ev picked up the take which was left under the supervision of the locals and left them a receipt. Near the mission of San Luis Obispo, the *Pedler* was seized by Spaniards and taken to Santa Barbara. The local government freed the ship, giving it leave. Nepogod'ev also found out from the remaining Kad'iaks that the locals of San Nicolas Island killed one of Babin's otter hunters. In retaliation, Babin was insolent and acted inhumanely towards the islanders. I learned about this from Nepogod'ev, although briefly, and even though I learned little, I did not remain silent about Babin's actions and described them in the report of 22 October 1814, which was delivered by the *Pedler*. In my report, I cited Nepogod'ev's account. Nepogod'ev independently reported these occurrences to the former Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Colonies in America, Collegiate Counselor and Cavalier Mr. Baranov. But it is unclear if he reported the facts of the incident or just what he surmised. Mr. Baranov mentioned in his instructions dated May 1815, delivered via the ship *Chirikov*, the following: "...in regards to Tarakanov and Babin, remind them about their bad behavior and tell them that this comes from me, that Tarakanov [is] to stay within the limits of his service, and reprimand Babin for his act of madness, as Tarakanov was ordered to remove the islanders without causing them any harm."

After the American ship *Pedler* left for Sitka, the *Il'mena* was sent to the coast of California for business trade and delivery of the hunting party to other places. When the ship came back from the coast of California to Bodega Bay in the last days of April 1815, Babin was demoted to a sailor and later Tarakanov dismissed him due to the complaints of the party. He was replaced by another member of the company by the name of Tarasov. Tarasov was sent with a hunting party to San Nicolas Island on the foreign ship *Forester*. As per Mr. Baranov's orders, Babin was severely reprimanded. In self-defense, he blamed everything on his people, who, he said, had committed these atrocities to avenge the killing of one of their party. Babin said that he was

unable to control their anger. Babin was ordered to stay on the *Il'mena* as a sailor, and was supposed to be going to Sitka. But he was not liked by the ship captain Mr. Wadsworth. To satisfy the captain's request, he was replaced by Pashennyi. I have reported all of this on the *Il'mena* to the Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Colonies in America, Collegiate Counselor and Cavalier Mr. Aleksandr Andreevich Baranov. I have also reported to Your High Nobleness the details of our trade. The report was sent via the *Kutuzov* in 1817 when I last had the honor to request Your High Nobleness to review many matters on which there was information. I had not previously mentioned Babin's situation because I assumed that it was already known in Sitka, as it was reported by Nepogod'ev. Upon arrival of Your High Nobleness to Bodega Bay and per Your Excellency's order, Iakov Babin was sent away from Colony Ross.

With honor and devotion
Your High Nobleness
Dear Sir

Your humble servant

Colony and Fort Ross
July 15, 1818

Document 2

A deposition of Kodiak hunter Ivan Kyglaiia about his capture by the Spaniards of a Russian American Company hunting party in 1815 California. About his time in Spanish captivity, the death of Kodiak Chukagnak (St. Peter the Aleut), and his subsequent escape to San Nicolas Island.

Ross, May 1819⁷

In May 1819 Ivan Kyglaiia, a Kodiak from the village Kashkak, was brought to the colony and Fort Ross from San Nicolas Island by the brig *Il'mena*. He was questioned with the aid of interpreters—Kodiak toions Ivan Samoilov and Iakov Shelechov. Kyglaiia reported the following account:

As ordered by Tarakanov on San Quentin, he was among a hunting party of other Kodiaks with 15 canoes, under the leadership of the company employee Tarasov. They were taken to San Nicolas Island via the English ship *Forester*. On the island, they hunted otters. Tarasov was soon disappointed by the hunt and did not see any further reason to stay on the island. He decided to move the entire party to other islands, Santa Rosa and Santa Catalina, and then to the California mainland. And [...] because Tarasov's canoe had sprung a leak and filled with water, and, in addition to this, because the weather was turning

rather cold, it was decided that the party would stay at San Pedro, where they were detained by the weather.

Next day a soldier arrived from Mission San Pedro. He told Tarasov that he would bring him two Kodiaks, who escaped earlier from San Clemente Island and were being held at the mission. He told Tarasov that he would deliver them [in exchange] for gifts. Even though there was sufficient time to proceed to Catalina Island, Tarasov decided to wait in the hopes of getting the escapees. On the fourth day of their stay, the party was ambushed by 20 soldiers on horseback. Everybody was tied up, including Tarasov. What followed was a series of most inhuman acts. Many were struck by axes, and one Kodiak, Chukagnak of the village of Kaguyak, had his head split with an axe. He was in a very serious condition. The soldiers seized all of the otters, and the personal belongings of everyone in the party. The captives were then taken to Mission San Pedro, where indeed there were two Kodiaks who escaped earlier from San Clemente. The missionaries and their leader (whose name Kyglaia did not know) tried to convince the prisoners to convert to the Catholic faith. The Kodiaks responded by saying that they had already accepted the Christian faith a long time ago at Kodiak, and they did not wish to accept another faith. Soon, Tarasov and the Kodiaks were transferred to Santa Barbara, but Ivan Kyglaia and the wounded Kaguyak Chukagnak were detained at the mission with the Indian criminals, without food and water for a few days.

At night, the leader of the mission sent in a few escaped Kodiaks with an order to convert them to Catholicism, but even then, under such a strain, Kyglaia and Chukagnak refused. At dawn the next day, a priest came to the jail along with some of the devoted Indians. The captured Kodiaks were told to step out of the jail. They were then surrounded by Indians who were ordered to cut every finger off of both Chukagnak's hands, then his arms were cut off, and finally, they opened his stomach, and Chukagnak was dead. Kyglaia expected the same fate but at this moment the priest received some paper, from where or whom Kyglaia never found out. Upon reading the paper, the priest ordered this paper buried along with Chukagnak. Kyglaia was taken back to the jail and in a few days was moved to Santa Barbara, where he did not find anyone—neither his Kodiak comrades, nor Tarasov. They had been transferred to Monterey.

During the fall and winter of 1815, the Kodiak hunters who escaped from Tarakanov were recaptured, including the two who were held in the Mission San Pedro—in all, ten people, some of whom were taken with their canoes. Among them was a Kodiak by the name of Kurbatov. All of them were taken to Santa Barbara. They were made to work along with the Indians chained for the crime they had committed. All of the Kodiaks made a pact to escape Santa Barbara and make their way to San Francisco via the mainland,

and from there on to colony Ross, but they were uncertain this would be possible.

He, Ivan Kyglaia, and one of the escapees of the village Kaguyak, Philip Atash'sha, decided on a different plan of escape. They stole a canoe and came back to San Pedro where they were originally captured. Then they moved to Catalina Island, and from there onto Santa Barbara Island. From there, they moved to San Nicolas Island. It all happened in a very short time, as the weather was very nice. The native people of San Nicolas Island welcomed their arrival and their stay on the island. They hunted cormorants and used their meat for food and their skins for clothing the Indians and themselves. His Kaguyak comrade Philip Atash'sha died after a year on San Nicolas Island. In the fall of last year, 1818, two Spanish three-mast ships anchored at San Nicolas Island for three days—there was very little wind. Every day the Spaniards came to the island in rowboats, the Indians gathered some plants for them that grew in the grass and had a fruit similar to berries with a rather pleasant taste. When the Spaniards arrived, Kyglaia went into hiding, assisted by the Indians.

Later, a ship with two masts arrived on the island. The people from the ship agreed to take Kyglaia aboard, but he was afraid because nobody on the ship spoke Russian or any of the Kodiak languages.

The witnesses to this testimony of Kodiak Ivan Kyglaia—interpreter of the village Mysovskoe, Toion Ivan Samoilov, per his order his son Dmitrii Samoilov applied his hand.

The witnesses to this testimony of Kodiak Ivan Kyglaia—interpreter of the village Chiniak Toion Iakov Shelekhov, signed myself.

DISCUSSION

These documents provide a cross-section view of RAC commercial activities on the California coast from 1815 to 1819, as seen through the eyes of representatives of three of the four social classes or “estates” in Russian America: a Russian, an Alaskan native, and a Creole (Black 2004:215; Khlebnikov 1990:187–194; Lightfoot 2005:140; Saveliev 2012). The documents describe detours in planned operations and violent interactions that occurred as a consequence of the conflicting priorities of diverse cultures. Each social estate had its own directives and world view, with the California colonial aspirations of the Spanish and the fur trading mercantile objectives of the Russians creating the context that put multiple cultures and social estates into contact on the west coast of North America in the early nineteenth century (Table 2).

Table 2

COMPARISON OF EVENTS ON THE WEST COAST OF NORTH AMERICA

Timeframe	San Nicolas Island	Russian Mercantile	Spanish Colonial
1600s	1602—Spanish explorer Sebastian Vizcaino sights and names San Nicolas Island (SNI).		1602—Sebastian Vizcaino names Farallon Islands, Point Reyes, Rio Sebastian (present day Russian River).
1700s	 <p>Old Garden Spring, San Nicolas Island (photograph by Steve Schwartz).</p>	<p>1728—Vitus Bering and Alexei Chirikov explore Bering Strait.</p> <p>1741–42—Bering and Chirikov claim Russian America (Alaska) for Russia.</p> <p>1784—Grigorii and Natalia Shelikhov establish a base for the Shelikhov-Golikov Company on Kodiak Island; the company becomes the Russian American Company.</p> <p>1799—Russian American Company (RAC), chartered by Czar Paul I, establishes base at Novo Arkhangelsk (now Sitka, Alaska).</p>	<p>1768—Visitador General, Joseph de Galvez, initiates expeditions to establish presence in Alta California; fears Russian expansion into west coast North America.</p> <p>1769—Franciscan Father Junipero Serra founds mission in San Diego, the first of 21 missions.</p>
1800s	<p>Early 1800s—Probable first contact with Europeans.</p> <p>1814—Alaskan native otter hunters employed by Russian American Company kill SNI inhabitants after a hunter is killed.^a</p> <p>Bet. 1817–1819—Two Alaskan native otter hunters live on SNI, one for over a year, while waiting for a Russian vessel to retrieve them.^b</p> <p>November 1835—Group of SNI inhabitants is taken by ship to the mainland; one woman is left behind.^{c,d}</p> <p>From 1841—Articles report that some visitors to SNI have seen evidence of, or seen, the Lone Woman.^e</p> <p>April 1852—Otter hunters George Nidever, Thomas Jeffries find footprints and brush enclosures.^c</p> <p>Fall/Winter 1852—George Nidever and Carl Dittman find footprints, artifacts.^{c,f}</p> <p>(Abt. July) 1853—Dittman, Nidever and hunting crew find Lone Woman, and she joins their group.^{c,f}</p> <p>(Abt. Sept. 1) 1853—Lone Woman arrives in Santa Barbara by boat with Nidever and crew, lives with Nidever family.^{c,f}</p> <p>Oct. 19, 1853—Lone Woman dies and is buried at Mission Santa Barbara.^g</p>	<p>1803—First joint otter hunting voyage involving American ships with Russian and Alaskan native otter hunting crews.</p> <p>1806—Nikolai Rezanov, Director of the Russian American Company, visits Presidio of San Francisco.</p> <p>1809–1812—RAC operative Ivan Kuskov makes multiple trips to California and eventually establishes a base as Fort Ross.</p> <p>1818—Correspondence between Kuskov and RAC Chief Administrator, Leontii Hagemester, shows awareness of a violent incident involving RAC otter hunters on SNI in 1814.^a</p> <p>1819—Alaskan native otter hunter Ivan Kyglai picked up from SNI by the Russian ship, <i>Il'mena</i>.^b</p> <p>1841—RAC sells Fort Ross and accompanying land to American John Sutter.</p> <p>Below: Kodiak Island male by Gavril Sarychev.</p> 	 <p>Mission Santa Barbara (photograph by Alexandra Morris).</p> <p>1821—Mexico wins independence from Spain; Alta California comes under Mexican rule.</p>

Alaska State Library, Alaska Purchase Centennial Commission Photograph Collection, P20–034.

^aCorrespondence from Ivan Kuskov at Fort Ross to RAC Chief Administrator, Leontii Hagemester, July 15, 1818 (Document 1).
^bDeposition of RAC Alaskan native hunter Ivan Kyglai from Fort Ross, May 1819 (Document 2).
^cEllison 1984:77–89.
^dOgden 1979:712.
^e*Boston Atlas*, A Female Crusoe, 1847, reprinted in *The Friend*, *Littel's Living Age*, and the *New York Daily Tribune*.
^fDittman 1878.
^gBlaise Cronin, 1944, Juana Maria, *Priestly Studies* 12(2):68–75, Santa Barbara.

The social estate of the individual authors of the three RAC documents is clearly reflected in the written records translated for this project. Document 1, as business correspondence penned by Kuskov in 1818, illustrates the literacy achieved by a Russian merchant born in 1765 in Tot'ma, Russia. He began RAC service as an agent assisting Alexander Baranov, handling various difficult and dangerous assignments in Russian Alaska before establishing and managing Fort Ross and the RAC's southern-most outpost, Colony Ross, from 1812 through 1821. Kuskov was awarded a gold medal for zealous service in 1805 and rose to grade 12 in the Russian civil service (granting him personal nobility) as a Commerce Counselor in 1807 (Khlebnikov 1973:55, 68).

Kuskov's salutations in the letter to his superior, Leontii Hagemeister—Your High Nobleness [*Vashe Visokoblagorodie*—demonstrate his awareness of the Russian Table of Ranks rules for addressing those in specific grades of noble rank.⁸ Hagemeister, a Captain-Lieutenant in the Navy, at grade nine, outranked Kuskov. Hagemeister was a hereditary nobleman by rank privilege as well as by birth (Pierce 1990:185–187). Kuskov, Hagemeister, and Alexander Baranov, who achieved grade six (and hereditary nobility) as a Collegiate Counselor in 1804 (Tikhmenev 1978:71, 455 fn.), were among the less than one percent of the Russian population who were part of the nobility as of 1816 (LeDonne 1991:22). Although vanishingly small in number, Russian nobles were the dominant administrative group in Imperial Russia as well as in the RAC hierarchy, and were referred to as “the honorable ones” in Russian America (Lightfoot 2005:140).

While the style of Document 1 is formal and the format one of business correspondence, Kuskov's tone is defensive—he is a subordinate explaining complexities of the work environment, deviations from plans, and actions taken. He answers most of the pointed questions posed by Hagemeister in his letter of January 1818. Kuskov offers a rather circuitous digest of the hunting, supply, and trading activities that took place during 1814 and early 1815. Kuskov then informs Hagemeister that he was aware of the violent incidents, including the murder of an Alaskan native otter hunter that sparked an alleged massacre of the Nicoleño by the RAC otter hunting group supervised by Iakov Babin. Both Il'ia Nepogod'ev, RAC operative on board the *Pedler*, who

heard about the events while on San Nicolas Island in August 1814, and Kuskov reported their findings to then RAC chief administrator Baranov: “I learned about this from Nepogod'ev, although briefly, and even though I learned little, I did not remain silent about Babin's actions and described them in the report of 22 October 1814 which was delivered by the *Pedler*.”

Embedded in Kuskov's correspondence is Baranov's reply to these reports in May 1815: “...in regards to Tarakanov and Babin, remind them about their bad behavior and tell them that this comes from me, that Tarakanov [is] to stay within the limits of his service, and reprimand Babin for his act of madness, as Tarakanov was ordered to remove the islanders without causing them any harm.”

What is intriguing to note with regard to this excerpt from Baranov is his statement that Tarakanov, who was in charge of hunting operations on the voyage, was under instructions to transport the Nicoleño off of the island. Presumably this meant moving them to a location that would benefit the RAC.

The practice of consolidating the native workforce was common in Russian Alaska. The RAC Board of Directors, for example, approved the relocation of 167 hunters along with their family members from the Aleutian Islands to Sitka in 1807 (Tikhmenev 1978:143). But the suggestion by Baranov to transport the Nicoleño elsewhere, whether to Colony Ross in northern California or to Russian Alaska, was abandoned following the massacre. In fact, the RAC Main Office in St. Petersburg turned down a subsequent request by a RAC administrator to transfer native inhabitants from California and the Hawaiian Islands for use as company laborers, because the RAC had no jurisdiction over them. Furthermore, it was felt that the indigenous peoples of California and the Hawaiian Islands would not be productive in the colder reaches of Russian Alaska, since they were used to living in warmer climates (Dmytryshyn et al. 1989:337–338).

The massacre in 1814 that appears to have decimated the native inhabitants on San Nicolas Island, who numbered between 200 and 300 prior to first European contact in the early 1800s (Schwartz 2010), could have contributed to the eventual removal of the Nicoleño. A little more than 20 years later, in November 1835, the small number of remaining Nicoleño were relocated

from the island and brought to the California mainland aboard the schooner *Peor es Nada*, except for one female who was left behind (Busch 1983:173, Ogden 1979:712).

At this point we do not know what triggered the murder of the Alaskan native otter hunter by the Nicoleño, nor do we know his name, or how many Nicoleño were killed in retaliation. The actual number of Babin's hunting group is speculative, but if there were 50 RAC hunters on the *Il'mena* at the start of the voyage in 1814, plus two Russian overseers (Tarakanov and Babin), and Babin commanded the smaller of two hunting groups, then the size of his crew may have been about 17, or roughly one-third of the total.

It is unclear whether Babin himself killed anyone, but he was held accountable for the actions of those under his command. In his defense, Babin “blamed everything on his people, who, he said, had committed these atrocities to avenge the killing of one of their party. Babin said that he was unable to control their anger.” According to Kuskov, Babin was reprimanded, demoted, then fired and sent from Colony Ross. And per Hagemeister's request, Babin went to Sitka for transfer to St. Petersburg, where he was to be interrogated about events on San Nicolas Island.

Hagemeister's report to the Sitka office on October 21, 1818 contained his response to Kuskov's letter: “The fur hunter Iakov Babin was brought here on the ship *Kutuzov*. I enclose Mr. Commercial Counselor Kuskov's reply to my inquiry as to why he [Babin] was not sent for investigation of the charge against him that he, allegedly, together with the Aleuts under his command in the fur hunting party has exterminated [*pogubil*] the inhabitants of Il'mena Island. The Sitka office should have received from Mr. former Chief Manager Baranov a copy of the statements [*skazski*] taken from the Aleuts who were involved in the affair. The original has been sent to the Main Office” (Pierce 1984:138–139).⁹

Hagemeister goes on to say that the copies of the statements and Kuskov's letter are to be sent with Babin to St. Petersburg, where Babin will account for his responsibility in this affair. And in December 1818, Semen Ivanovich Ianovskii, who assumed the role of RAC chief administrator following Hagemeister's departure, added his request that testimony be taken of those who were with Babin in 1814 on San Nicolas Island and sent on to the Sitka office to be forwarded to the RAC Main Office

(Pierce 1984:172). Whether Babin actually traveled to St. Petersburg is unknown, but there are records of him living at Fort Ross in 1822 (Khlebnikov 1990:102), so if he did appear at a Board of Directors inquest, he was able to return to California by 1822, if not sooner. Born a peasant in Tobolsk, Babin lived in the Russian American colonies until his death in either 1839 or 1841. He married a baptized California Indian in Sitka in 1827, and following her death wed an Alaskan native woman on Kodiak Island in 1838 (Pierce 1990:14).

Document 1 is significant in a number of ways. Not only does this official RAC correspondence confirm the long-rumored violent altercation between the Nicoleño and an RAC hunting group, it is also the earliest primary source record of a non-native presence on San Nicolas Island, with the visit of the Russian and Alaskan native otter hunting group in 1814. Ironically, it is the earliest documentary record of a murder and a massacre on San Nicolas Island. These violent events would certainly have impacted the remaining Nicoleño, and could have led to their removal (except for one native woman) from the island in 1835.

Additionally, Document 1 and related correspondence shows that three successive RAC chief administrators (Baranov, Hagemeister, and Ianovskii) made efforts to follow established policies and procedures regarding the investigation of serious crimes involving RAC employees. Because the RAC was a private mercantile enterprise and not an extension of the Russian government, representatives of the RAC did not have the authority to pass judgment in criminal cases. RAC administrators were required to gather testimony and witnesses and send them, along with the alleged perpetrators of the crime, to Russia where the case could be reviewed by the appropriate judicial authorities (Black 2004:133).

The new information from Document 1 suggests avenues for further archeological and historical investigation. There is a possibility of identifying an Alaskan native burial on San Nicolas Island that dates from 1814, if the RAC otter hunter killed by the Nicoleño was buried on the island and not taken on board the *Pedler* or the *Il'mena* and interred elsewhere. In terms of the historical record, Russian or American archival repositories holding documents from the RAC and Russian Alaska might contain copies of the testimony

from those Alaskan natives who were with Iakov Babin on San Nicolas Island and participated in the violent altercation. Letters from Kuskov and Nepogod'ev to Baranov in the fall of 1814 could also give additional details about the confrontations, if discovered. In addition, there may be legal decisions resulting from judicial review of the case regarding the massacre on San Nicolas Island, with a final ruling about Babin's accountability for the events that took place involving his otter hunting party.

It is important to note that the three Russian documents discussed here record the presence of RAC otter hunting parties on San Nicolas Island in 1814, 1815, and 1819, with two Alaskan native hunters living on the island for an extended period, from about 1817 through 1819. The individuals involved in those hunting operations may have left artifacts and historic items on San Nicolas Island, either intentionally or inadvertently. Specifically, the massacre event in 1814 could have generated a number of broken and discarded weapons, while the lengthy vigil of the two Alaskan native hunters Kyglaia and Atash'sha (Document 2) would have provided an opportunity for them to create and abandon subsistence tools as well as hunting implements.

In fact, these RAC otter hunters and their Russian overseers could have contributed artifacts to the extraordinary cache discovered on San Nicolas Island in 2010 (Erlandson et al. 2013). They may also be responsible for leaving the material associated with Alaskan native technology on the island reported by earlier researchers: an atlatl (spear thrower), toggle harpoon heads, and bone arrow bunts (Heizer 1945:109–112; Koerper et al. 2006:132–127; Rogers 1993:17–21).

Among the items recovered from the cache found in 2010 are objects that appear to be of Alaskan native manufacture as well as artifacts that were crafted with historic materials, such as projectile points made from bottle glass. The use of historic materials provides a specific time frame within which these objects would have been created: between first European contact in the early 1800s and 1853, when the Lone Woman was taken from San Nicolas to the mainland. There are also ornamental items, such as eccentric, barbed abalone fishhooks, that demonstrate the work of craftspersons with time on their hands who wanted to show off their tool-making talents. We cannot say for certain whether

or not Kyglaia or Atash'sha or other RAC otter hunters produced any of these items, but Kyglaia and Atash'sha were on San Nicolas Island for more than a year, within the time period in which some of these artifacts were created. And they would likely have had the knowledge and skills to produce objects similar to those they used as natives of Kodiak, Alaska, and perhaps to observe Nicoleño tools and imitate or innovate, using local materials and historic components that were brought to San Nicolas Island.

From the translation of Document 2, we learn that while on San Nicolas Island awaiting the *Il'mena*, Kyglaia and Atash'sha hunted cormorants and used the meat for food and the skins for clothing themselves and the native people. The two obviously made and used tools for hunting cormorants. They may have brought tools with them from Santa Barbara, accessed a cache of tools left on the island by RAC hunting groups, created their own tools while on San Nicolas, bartered for tools from the Nicoleño, or done any combination of these. Considering that Kyglaia lived on San Nicolas for at least another seven months following Atash'sha's death before being retrieved by the *Il'mena* in the spring of 1819, he would have had ample time to leave artifacts on San Nicolas Island.

The second document of this set, dated May 1819 and originating from Colony Ross, is the testimony of the Alaskan native otter hunter, Ivan Kyglaia, who began his narrative by describing otter hunting activities that commenced on San Nicolas Island in 1815 and culminated with his retrieval from the island four years later, in the spring of 1819. A Kodiak of the village Kashkak, Kyglaia was a representative of the Alaskan native "estate" that was a vital part of the RAC enterprise. Extraordinarily skilled hunters, particularly of marine animals such as sea otter, Alaskan adult males were conscripted as subjects of the Russian Empire (Russian Alaska) to work for the RAC for up to four years (Dmytryshyn et al. 1989:337–338; Lightfoot 2005:116). They were paid a commission for their work or in redeemable Company scrip (Tikhmenev 1978:144). Alaskan natives were assigned a Russian given name (such as Ivan, Peter, or Philip), which was appended to their name when they were baptized as Orthodox Christians.

A formal deposition signed by two witnesses, Kyglaia's testimony was produced with the assistance of two Alaskan native interpreters, who were classified

as Kodiak toions or chiefs: Ivan Samoilov, of the village Mysovskoe, and Iakov Shelechov, of the village Chiniak. Toions Samoilov and Shelechov likely translated questions from Kuskov for Kyglaiia, and Kyglaiia's response to those questions forms his testimony. Kuskov undoubtedly considered Kyglaiia's testimony to be important, since Kyglaiia had been captured by the Spanish in San Pedro, witnessed the killing of an Alaskan native otter hunter at the direction of a Spanish cleric, and then managed to escape from the Spanish in Santa Barbara and return to San Nicolas Island.

Kyglaiia's narrative began where Kuskov's 1818 explanatory letter left off, with the ferrying of the RAC otter hunting crew under the direction of Boris Tarasov from the California coast to San Nicolas Island in the spring of 1815. The ship that delivered the hunting party to the island was an American-owned vessel, the *Forester*, although the *Forester* flew false colors (the British flag) to avoid entanglements with the British during the War of 1812 (Pierce 1965:159). As in the arrangements made by Wilson Price Hunt, supercargo on the *Pedler*, the captain of the *Forester*, William Pigot, agreed to assist Baranov with hunting and trade operations along the coast of California (Ogden 1979:192). According to Kyglaiia, Boris Tarasov and his otter hunting crew, with 15 *baidarkas*, were deposited on San Nicolas Island by the *Forester* in the spring of 1815, to be retrieved in the fall by the *Il'mena*.

However, since the hunting on the island was disappointing, the group did not stay on San Nicolas for long. Kyglaiia recalled that Tarasov led them to Santa Rosa Island and Catalina Island before taking the group to San Pedro on the mainland for shelter from the wind and because Tarasov's *baidarka* needed repair. Although this was the only time that Kyglaiia reports that the group landed at San Pedro, Spanish documents note that Tarasov and his company appear to have been at San Pedro three times in August and September (Mathes et al. 2008:80, 87; Ogden 1941:61–62, 198). On that final trip, Tarasov and his hunting group were accosted and captured by the Spanish through a ruse, on or about September 18, 1815, according to a note to Lt. José de la Guerra from Los Angeles Commissioner Guillermo Cota dated September 19. Cota "states that he arrested some Russian Indians, including Boris, taking from them some *kayaks* that he has them in custody on the beach

and some objects are being taken care of. He awaits orders to continue" (Mathes et al. 2008:80).

From Kyglaiia's account we learn that the methods used by the Spanish to seize the hunting group were harsh; all were tied, and one of the Alaskan native hunters, Chukagnak, a Kodiak of the village Kaguyak, had his head split with an axe. According to Kyglaiia, the captives were taken to the "mission San Pedro," where they were put in jail with two other Alaskan native hunters who had been incarcerated earlier. This mention of a mission in San Pedro led to speculation that the group was taken to the mission nearest to San Pedro: Mission San Gabriel, about 10 miles northeast of Los Angeles.

Spanish documents indicate that the captives were actually kept in the pueblo of Los Angeles (Mathes et al. 2008:81, 86; Ogden 1941:62). In a letter from Cota to de la Guerra dated September 22, 1815, Los Angeles Commissioner Cota notes: "The Russian Indians were prisoners in the jail, Boris was in the guardhouse; and to the first, they are given rations, and to the second he is aided in his house. The latter asked permission for his sailors to be allowed to bathe every day, and permission was conceded. He asked for license for him and his men to attend mass in the nearby mission, and this was not permitted" (Mathes et al. 2008:81). Tarasov's request to attend religious services at the nearby mission suggests that his group was not held at Mission San Gabriel, but that Tarasov was aware that there was a mission near Los Angeles. Tarasov might also have been referring to the *asistencia*, or small branch mission to Mission San Gabriel, located in Los Angeles' central plaza, called *Asistencia Nuestra Señora de la Reina*, built in 1784. After 30 years in operation, the *asistencia* had fallen into disrepair, but in 1814 construction began on a new church to replace the original one. The guardhouse where Tarasov was taken was on the southeasterly side of the central plaza, with the jail likely situated close to the guardhouse (Guinn 1896:62).

Once in the jail, the Alaskan natives were pressured by "the missionaries and their leader (whose name Kyglaiia did not know)" to convert to the Catholic faith, which the hunters declined to do since they had already accepted the Russian Orthodox Christian religion. An additional Russian source notes that Alaskan native otter hunters held by the Spanish had been urged to

accept Catholicism: on an 1820 visit to Monterey and Santa Barbara, RAC office manager Kiril Khlebnikov encountered seven Alaskan native otter hunters who were held captive by the Spanish. “They had all adopted the Catholic faith, some willingly and others against their will” (Khlebnikov 1990:91).

The group was soon split up, with Tarasov and the others heading for Santa Barbara and then Monterey, while Kyglaia and the ailing Chukagnak were kept in jail. This is confirmed by Spanish correspondence from de la Guerra to the new governor, Pablo Vicente de Sola, dated October 5, 1815 in which de la Guerra informs him, “That he is sending 22 individuals arrested and their overseer,” and “that the two individuals that are missing remained in town, one wounded and the other taking care of him” (Mathes et al. 2008:86). This undoubtedly refers to the injured Chukagnak and Kyglaia, kept in jail in Los Angeles. From this note we may assume that both men were still alive in early October.

Chukagnak and Kyglaia were once again urged to convert to Catholicism, this time at night by several Alaskan natives, but they refused. The next morning the two were taken out of the jail and surrounded by a priest who gave orders to California Indian neophytes. Chukagnak was tortured (fingers cut off, arms cut off, then disemboweled) and he died, according to Kyglaia. Kyglaia’s testimony represents the only eyewitness account discovered to date about Chukagnak’s demise. After Chukagnak died, Kyglaia expected the same fate, but was given a reprieve and sent back to jail when the priest received a note. The priest read the note and had it buried along with the body of Chukagnak.

Kyglaia was transferred to Santa Barbara within a few days, but by the time he arrived, Tarasov and his otter hunting colleagues had gone to Monterey, and had arrived there by November 1, according to a note written to Kuskov by John Elliot d’Castro, agent for the RAC onboard the *Il’mena* in 1815 (Istomin et al. 2005:243). Tarasov and Elliot d’Castro, who was also apprehended by the Spanish off the coast of central California, were taken from Monterey to San Blas in Mexico on the *Paz y Religion* (Ogden 1979:216). Elliot managed to secure passage back to San Francisco, there to be turned over to the Russian naval officer Otto Kotzebue on the *Rurik* in the fall of 1816, but Tarasov was held until 1820, when he fled to Panama (Mathes et al. 2008:145, 148; Pierce

1990:134). As for the Alaskan natives who had been held by the Spanish in Monterey and elsewhere, 15 were released to a Russian naval officer, Iakov Podushkin, on board the *Chirikov* in 1817 (Ogden 1979:244).

Although Kyglaia reported that 15 *baidarkas* had been taken to San Nicolas Island on the *Forester*, it appears from Spanish documents that 12 *baidarkas* were confiscated from Tarasov’s group at San Pedro, and 24 people, including Tarasov, were captured in San Pedro in September 1815 (Mathes et al. 2008:92, 147). The numbers of people and *baidarkas* involved varies in some of the other Spanish documents, but an official Spanish inventory of goods confiscated from Tarasov and his hunters lists 12 *baidarkas*, and since Alaskan native *baidarkas* usually accommodated two hunters per *baidarka*, that would indicate that there were 24 people taken into custody in San Pedro (Mathes et al. 2008:105).

Following is the Spanish inventory, dated 1817:

List of the goods that, by order of the Governor, have been indicated to be received by the distinguished sergeant don Carlos Carrillo who took them to this presidio as seized in the cove of San Pedro from the so-called *buzo* [diver] named Boris with twelve *kayaks* = 3 small bags of rice—2 of the same of tobacco, 11 $\frac{7}{8}$ *varas* of wool flannel—10 $\frac{5}{6}$ *varas* of purple smooth silk from China—1 piece of the same of cane yellow—9 *varas* of narrow blue cloth in two pieces—2 tobacco pouches—2 small sacks of otter—5 sea otter hides—12 intestine shirts—40 sea otter pelts—2 pieces of narrow ribbon—1 in process of the same—1 sack with fishing implements—2 small pieces of lead—2 small barrels=1 of the same dismantled—1 small axe—1 small cannon—2 old copper helmets—1 tent—9 muskets and shotguns in very bad condition, one of them with a split barrel and the other with useless and incomplete locks—2 small packets of gunpowder—three flasks with the same—a notebook of Boris—1 hammer—1 small pliers—2 punches—1 empty bottle.

This inventory of items confiscated from the RAC hunting crew in 1815 represents the earliest primary source record to list historical artifacts that had been on San Nicolas Island.

Kyglaia did find 10 Alaskan natives who had been captured and sent to Santa Barbara when he arrived there in October 1815. Several of the otter hunters managed to escape by *baidarka* and made their way to Colony Ross (Tikhmenev 1978:138). Kyglaia and a compatriot, Philip Atash’sha, of the village Kaguyak, devised a different plan: they escaped from Santa

Barbara, took a *baidarka* and paddled south to San Pedro. From San Pedro they staged a journey to San Nicolas Island, paddling about 24 miles from San Pedro (Palos Verdes peninsula) to Catalina Island, then about 25 miles from Catalina to Santa Barbara Island, and a final 28 miles from Santa Barbara Island to San Nicolas Island. The *baidarka* paddling route described by Kyglaia confirms the identification of San Nicolas Island as Il'men Island in the Russian documents, because this path illustrates the most logical paddling route to San Nicolas Island from the California coast (see Fig. 1). This trip is certainly a testament to the skill and stamina of the Alaskan natives, who apparently paddled nearly 80 miles in a fairly short period, since Kyglaia reported that the weather was favorable for the journey.

The reception of the two Alaskan natives by the Nicoleño appears to have been without discord, despite the fact that there had been a massacre on the island involving an RAC hunting group in 1814. According to his deposition, Kyglaia described the local inhabitants of San Nicolas Island as “happy of their arrival and their stay on the island.” We know that the *Il'mena* did not visit the island between October 1, 1815 and the spring of 1819, so the two Alaskan natives lived on San Nicolas within that three-and-a-half-year time frame, although Atash'sha died after a year.

Kyglaia's narrative concluded with remarks about the visit of two three-masted Spanish ships in the fall of 1818, after Atash'sha died. These vessels were becalmed, and the island natives helped to hide Kyglaia when the Spanish rowed to shore. The “Spanish” ships that Kyglaia reported might have been those of Hipolito Bouchard, a French privateer acting in support of the Argentina independence movement, who took over the Monterey presidio in November and then raided Rancho del Refugio on the coast of California in early December 1818. Bouchard went on to loot Mission San Juan Capistrano and continued south to Isla Cedros off the coast of Baja California (Beebe and Senkewicz 2001:298–304). There is no indication in Bouchard's account that they were on or near the Channel Islands; however, it seems likely that they would have passed the islands at some point in late 1818. Bouchard's two ships were the *Santa Rosa* (a corvette) and *La Argentina* (a frigate), both well-armed. Kyglaia may have mistaken the two ships as Spanish ships, or they may have flown the Spanish flag as a ruse.

Kyglaia also noted that another vessel visited San Nicolas Island during his stay, which arrived after the two Spanish ships left. Apparently Kyglaia interacted with some of the crew and understood that they offered him passage off of the island, but because no one on the ship spoke Russian or any of the Alaskan native languages, he declined the offer. After spending time in Bodega Bay and the Hawaiian Islands completing repairs, as well as in Sitka, the *Il'mena* was once again sent to San Nicolas Island in early 1819 to deliver a hunting group, and Kyglaia was finally able to leave the island and return to RAC establishments (Ogden 1979:213; Pierce 1965, 1984).

Kuskov forwarded Kyglaia's May 1819 deposition to his superior Semen Ianovskii, who in turn shared the information with the RAC Main Office. Emperor Alexander I received a summary of Kyglaia's account in 1820 (Dmytryshyn et al. 1989:332–334). Upon learning of the manner in which Chukagnak was purported to have died, the Emperor instructed his minister of foreign affairs, Karl Nesselrode, to look into the matter (Pierce 1990:397). Others in the RAC and Russian Orthodox Church hierarchy believed Kyglaia's account to be truthful, and Chukagnak was canonized as St. Peter the Aleut in 1980.

The deposition of Kyglaia not only represents the first Alaskan native narrative to describe RAC hunting activities, but it is also the sole eyewitness account of the torture and death of Kodiak native Chukagnak at the direction of a Spanish cleric in Los Angeles in 1815. Chukagnak's glorification as a saint of the Orthodox Church in America came as a direct result of Kyglaia's testimony.

Implications for further research related to the details presented in Document 2 include the possibility of encountering an Alaskan native burial, that of Philip Atash'sha, who died on San Nicolas Island in either 1817 or 1818. Additional Spanish records may exist noting the presence of Kyglaia and Atash'sha in Santa Barbara, 1815–1816, and (though less likely) a burial registration for Chukagnak in the pueblo of Los Angeles in 1815. In addition, artifacts of Alaskan native style and technique may be tied to the presence of Kyglaia and Atash'sha on San Nicolas Island from roughly 1817 to the spring of 1819.

The third and final document comes from Antipatr Baranov and is an excerpt from his travel journal, rather than a ship record.¹⁰ Modeled after a ship's log, Baranov's

entries cover a two-week period in the fall of 1815 when he was on board the *Il'mena* engaged in trading and hunting operations as an RAC representative. A member of the Creole estate—that is, the child of a Russian father and Alaskan native mother—Baranov was the son of RAC chief administrator Alexander Baranov and Anna Grigorieva, daughter of an Aleut toion, Grigorii Raskashchikov (Lightfoot 2005:140-141; Pierce 1990:23). Born about 1797, Baranov traveled on the *Il'mena* in 1815, acting in concert with RAC agent John Elliot d'Castro, and trading with Spanish contacts such as the Ortega family in central California. Baranov's journal was informal in style and written in short, clipped phrases separated by commas.

Baranov was around 18 years of age at the time of his journey on the *Il'mena*, and he may have been learning how to conduct trading and hunting operations from the more seasoned members on board the vessel. Baranov's lack of familiarity with the multicultural setting came into play in the terms he used to describe the members of the Ortega family who interacted with the *Il'mena* crew. He noted someone he referred to as "Padre Olfama," but there was no such cleric on the California coast. The *Il'mena* was traveling from San Luis Obispo south towards Santa Barbara, stopping at El Cojo and Refugio. These locations and the name Ortega help to identify the trading partners mentioned in Baranov's entries.¹¹

During the two-week period covered by the excerpt from Baranov's journal, more than trading took place. On September 25, after Baranov received a warning from José María Ortega (Olfama) not to come ashore because Spanish soldiers were in the area, some of the crew ignored the suggestion, left the *Il'mena*, and landed at El Cojo (Ogden 1979:213). They were soon apprehended by the Spanish. Captain William Wadsworth and three others barely managed to escape, but supercargo Elliot d'Castro was held, along with Osip Volkov and five others, including an American. All of those seized were taken first to Santa Barbara and then transported to Monterey. Elliot d'Castro wrote letters that were delivered to the *Il'mena* informing the ship of the group's whereabouts and requesting that clothes for himself and the others be sent, along with gifts for the Commandant. Elliot also shared news of the capture of Tarasov's hunting group in San Pedro, and later, of the arrival of Tarasov and his crew in Monterey.

When it was determined that nothing further could be done to assist the RAC employees in Spanish custody, the *Il'mena* sailed to San Miguel Island, San Nicolas Island, and San Clemente Island to retrieve hunting crews. This would be the last time the *Il'mena* would visit San Nicolas Island until the spring of 1819. The ship spent the winter of 1815 at Bodega Bay, then sprang a leak and went to the Hawaiian Islands in 1816 to make repairs, then returned to Sitka in mid-1817 (Khlebnikov 1973:80; Pierce 1965:236). The final voyage of the *Il'mena* occurred in 1820, when the vessel's service to the company ended with her shipwreck on June 18 near Point Arena, north of Fort Ross (Khlebnikov 1990:41–42).

Baranov's journal entries mark the end of a two-year period of misfortune for the Company on the California coast (1814–1815): two Alaskan native hunters were reported to have been murdered (one on San Nicolas Island, one in Los Angeles); a massacre apparently took place on San Nicolas Island that involved the Nicoleño and an RAC hunting group; and at least 30 RAC employees were seized on the shores of California and held, some for years, by the Spanish. Despite these disastrous events, business operations continued unabated. A cargo of sea otter pelts reportedly brought in by the *Il'mena* from hunting groups around the Channel Islands totaled 392 in 1814, while Boris Tarasov admitted to the Spanish that he and his crew obtained 950 sea otter skins in 1815 (Mathes et al. 2008:81; Ogden 1979:193). In addition, until he was apprehended in September 1815, John Elliot d'Castro had been very successful in trading with the Spanish on behalf of the RAC, and had amassed 10,000 *piasters* for Kuskov to send to Sitka (Khlebnikov 1973:88).

Baranov's journal entries as well as Kyglai's testimony have implications for additional historical research, since these two documents may represent the first primary source records to note a non-native presence on San Miguel and Santa Rosa Islands during the Mission Period (1769–1882), and perhaps even earlier.¹²

CONCLUSIONS

Russian American Company documents translated for this project describe dramatic and deadly episodes that resulted from clashes between people from different cultures on the west coast of North America in the

early 1800s. These primary source records—business correspondence, a native narrative, and an excerpt from a travel journal—in combination with related historical letters, ethnographic observations, and new information about San Nicolas Island archeological discoveries, provide details about conflicts with consequences that continue to have an impact today.

The murder of an Alaskan native otter hunter on San Nicolas Island in 1814, as reported in Document 1, was the cause of a disproportionate response—i.e., a massacre—by the other RAC otter hunters. That massacre, in turn, may have contributed to the subsequent removal of a small remaining group of Nicoleño in 1835, save one female accidentally left behind. That woman died in Santa Barbara in 1853, bringing to a close the story of the Nicoleño people who had inhabited San Nicolas Island for hundreds, if not thousands, of years.

The demise of the Nicoleño as a result of the 1814 massacre was not disregarded by the RAC authorities, however. Document 1 and related Company correspondence show that there was consistent concern about the violence on San Nicolas Island connected with the RAC otter hunting group, and document the diligent efforts of at least three RAC chief administrators, as well as other Company officials, to report on, and investigate, the situation and bring the person responsible for the hunting group, Russian fur trader Iakov Babin, to Russia to undergo an official judicial review of the case.

A second murder, as recorded in the native narrative or deposition of Alaskan otter hunter Kyglaiia, took place on the mainland in 1815, and that too had long-lasting repercussions. Although his is the only eyewitness account of the torture and killing of his comrade, Chukagnak, Kyglaiia’s testimony was accepted as truthful by everyone from Emperor Alexander I to the RAC and church hierarchy. Because Chukagnak was viewed as having died a martyr—he reportedly rejected pressure by a Spanish cleric to renounce his Orthodox religion and accept the Catholic faith—the Alaskan native was transformed into St. Peter the Aleut by the Orthodox Church of America in 1980 (Fig. 3).

It is ironic that through these acts of violence, which began with otter hunting trips to San Nicolas Island, two Native Americans—one a native of San Nicolas Island and the other a native of Kodiak Island—have become icons in contemporary culture, figuratively and literally.



Figure 3. St. Peter the Aleut. Inscription is in English and Greek, as the icon was intended as a gift to the Kykkos Monastery in Cyprus.

The Lone Woman, who is the model for Scott O’Dell’s fictionalized protagonist in *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, is a heroine to the novel’s legion of readers, while St. Peter the Aleut is revered by Orthodox Christians, with his image displayed in iconic form in churches around the world. As a result of contact with non-native cultures, the Lone Woman of San Nicolas Island and Chukagnak the Kodiak have transcended temporal reality and become timeless. Theirs is a cautionary tale.

NOTES

¹The source of information in the November 1856 issue of the *Santa Barbara Gazette* was a friend of the reporter who was “an old and respectable resident of California.” This friend attributed the massacre on San Nicolas Island to an encounter with RAC otter hunters in 1811, delivered to the island by American Isaac Whittemore on a Boston-based vessel. According to the source, the otter hunters were on the island for a year, killed all the Nicoleño males, and the hunters were retrieved by Whittemore. While this tale has a kernel of truth, the specific details are false: Isaac Whittemore was not

involved with the massacre on San Nicolas Island; Whittemore was not even on the coast of California in 1811 (Howay 1973:93; Ogden 1941:164; Pierce 1990:539). He commanded the *Charon* in 1812 and had a contract with the RAC to take hunters to the Farallon Islands in northern California, not the southern Channel Islands. Whittemore retrieved an RAC seal hunting group on the Farallons in August 1812 and returned to Sitka in September (Ogden 1979:171).

²The number of Nicoleño removed from San Nicolas Island on the vessel *Peor es Nada* in 1835 has been reported in secondary sources to have been as many as 30 (*Boston Atlas* 1847, reprinted in the *New York Daily Tribune*) to as few as three (one male, two females) in William Dane Phelps 1841 *Logbook of the Alert* (Busch 1983:172–173). George Nidever, who brought the Lone Woman to Santa Barbara in 1853, states that Isaac Sparks (who was on the 1835 ‘rescue’ trip) informed him there were 17–18 Nicoleño taken to San Pedro (Nidever admits his recollection is uncertain). Although there is a record of the ship arriving with the Nicoleño in San Pedro on November 21 of that year (Ogden 1979:712), there is no notation of the number of individuals on the ship. Confirmation of the number of Nicoleño brought from the island in 1835 must wait until additional primary source documents are found.

³Timofei Nikitich Tarakanov was a Russian fur trader and RAC operative who acted as an overseer for a number of the Company’s otter hunting forays along the west coast of North America. He was in charge of the otter hunting crew on the *Il’mena* in 1814. His name has been misreported in the past as Timofei Osipovich Tarakanov and Vasilij Petrovich Tarakanov (the second name based on a fictionalized tale concocted by translator Ivan Petrov for H. H. Bancroft) (Owens 2006:3–21). Tarakanov’s true patronymic—his middle name, created from his father’s given name—is Nikitich, as found in Russian records recently discovered by A. V. Zorin (Zorin 2010).

⁴There is discrepancy in the literature about how the early nineteenth century Russian name for San Nicolas Island, and the ship that the island was presumably named for, should be transliterated. The island and the ship are both represented as Il’men and Il’mena in various sources (Dmytryshyn et al. 1989, Ogden 1941, Pierce 1984). The vessel was named *Il’mena*, while the island was named Il’men’ (with a soft sign after the “n,” as well as after the “l”). It appears that the mix-up is due to a simple confusion between the ship’s and the island’s names, not between different case-forms of the same name (B. Dralyuk, personal communication 2012).

⁵United States National Archives and Record Service, Records of the Russian American Company, Correspondence of the Governors General, Communications Sent, 1818, roll 26, vol. 1, doc. 24, fols. 10–11; (Pierce 1984:10–11).

⁶Translated into English by Irina Vladi L. Wender. The contemporaneous copy of the original handwritten correspondence is archived in the Russian State Library (Moscow, Russian Federation), Manuscript Division, f. 204. k. 32. d. 18. fols. 1–2v.

⁷Translated into English by Irina Vladi L. Wender. The contemporaneous copy of the original handwritten document is archived in the Russian State Library (Moscow, Russian Federation), Manuscript Division, f. 204. k. 32. d. 39. fols. 1–2v.

⁸The Russian Table of Ranks was established by Peter the Great in 1722 in order to organize the military, government, and court of Imperial Russia into 14 equivalent ranks, with 14 as the lowest grade and one as the highest. Members in the three branches advanced through the ranks by service to the Tsar and the State (rather than by birth or seniority). The Table of Ranks provided a way for anyone, even commoners like Alexander Baranov and Ivan Kuskov, to enter the civil service, progress through the grade levels, and enter the nobility. This system was in place, with modifications, until 1917 (Pipes 1997:124–135).

⁹United States National Archives and Record Service, Records of the Russian American Company, Correspondence of the Governors General, Communications Sent, 1818, roll 26, vol. 1, doc. 232, fols. 109–110; (Pierce 1984:138–139).

¹⁰Translated into English by Irina Vladi L. Wender. The contemporaneous copy of the original handwritten document is archived in the Russian State Library (Moscow, Russian Federation), Manuscript Division, f. 204. k. 32. d. 37. fols. 1–2v.

¹¹The Rancho Nuestra Señora del Refugio in Santa Barbara County was one of the few Spanish-era land grants in California. In 1791, a member of the Portolá expedition of 1769, Juan Francisco Ortega, petitioned for a land grant, and the grant was finalized in 1794. The estate passed to his sons, in particular to José María Ortega (1759–1854), when Juan Francisco Ortega died (Hvolboll 1990). In 1806 and 1807, an American trading vessel, the *Mercury*, stopped surreptitiously at the Rancho del Refugio on numerous occasions to trade with the locals, one of whom was simply referred to first as “the farmer” and later as “the Old Farmer” (Davis 1806–1807). In 1815, Antipatr Baranov referred to José María Ortega as “Olfama” simply because this must have been how the Russian heard the American captain refer to this individual. To cement the association between José María Ortega and the “Old Farmer,” there is the following note in Kiril Khlebnikov’s journal of October 1820 (Khlebnikov 1990:90): “Here in Santa Barbara there is a retired sergeant, José María Ortega, who goes by the name of ‘old farmer.’ He is a rich merchant and has connections with many American captains and Russian ships here. Doctor Elliott always stayed with him. His plantation near the Cape of Concepción stretches for three leagues.”

¹²The letter from Father José Señán of Mission San Buenaventura to José de la Guerra, dated July 15, 1816 (Señán 1962:86), describes trips by neophytes in 1816 to Santa Rosa Island to retrieve island natives, and mentions that two Alaskan otter hunters returned with the group. Kyglai’a’s testimony, however, provides evidence of an RAC hunting group led by Boris Tarasov on Santa Rosa a year earlier, in 1815.

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