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California Through Russian Eyes, 1806–1848

James R. Gibson (compiler, translator, and editor)
[Early California Commentaries, Volume 2.]
Norman: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 2013,
491 pages, 13 color illustrations, index, \$40.50 (hardcover).

Reviewed by Glenn Farris

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Accounts written by visitors to early California provide valuable insights into the people, places, and events that occurred there. Foreigners were the most likely to leave detailed observations, since much of what they saw was unusual, quaint, impressive, or disturbing to them, much more so than to the inhabitants of the country, who seldom left behind their own recollections of everyday life. The 32 documents included in this volume (compiled by the prolific historian of Russian America, Professor James Gibson) were penned by Russian visitors to California during the period from 1806 to 1848; they fall into three main categories: personal journals written on a daily basis, reminiscences (often written in later years), and official reports. I believe that the daily journals are the most valuable of the three, because they have the immediacy of having been written at the time (as opposed to being cleaned-up versions based on recollections of times past, often lacking the very useful specific dates of the events described). The official reports can contain important observations, but they also tend to be more formal, and thus lack some of the fine details of life that can be of such interest to ethnographers and archaeologists. Such reports are, however, of importance to historians.

Although the bulk of the accounts included here focus on the San Francisco Bay and (to a lesser extent) the Monterey Bay areas, there are some that go further, touching on Bodega Bay, Sonoma, Santa Barbara, and San Diego. While anchored in San Francisco Bay, naval officers engaged in detailed surveys of the whole Bay area, even venturing a short way up the Sacramento River. They also visited missions Dolores, Santa Clara, San José, San Rafael, and Sonoma. The descriptions in this volume were primarily written by naval officers (Otto von Kotzebue, Vasily Golovnin, Aleskey Lazarev, Nikolay Shishmaryov, Karl Gillson, Mikhail Vasilyev,

Akhilles Shabelsky, Dmitry Zavalishin, and Yegeny von Berens), but were also penned by officials of the Russian American Company (including Nikolai Rezanov, one of the board of directors), chief managers of Russian America (Matvey Muravyov, Peter Chistyakov, and Ferdinand Wrangell), a long-time merchant who came to know California well over the period from 1817 to 1832 (Kirill Khlebnikov), an agronomist who was sent to Fort Ross to improve crop yields (Yegor Chernykh), and managers of Fort Ross (Peter Kostromitinov and Alexander Rotchev). Writing from varying perspectives, they touch on numerous aspects of life in California—life in the missions and the treatment of the Indians; the military situation as observed in the presidios; and the changing political situation in California, ranging from the era of Spanish control to the Mexican and finally Californio rule of the province. In fact, the last two documents move on to observations about the discovery of gold (Mikhail Tebenkov and Alexander Rotchev).

Russian visitors seem to have enjoyed a particularly favorable reception at the various ports where they anchored. Somehow the Spanish and later the Mexicans seem to have seen these individual Russians in a different light than they did Fort Ross, which was considered an ominous presence on the northern coast of California. For one thing, the Russians were good customers for the grains, especially wheat, that grew so prolifically in California, whereas the American ships were mostly trading for hides and tallow. One of the most engaging accounts included here is that of Lieutenant Dmitry Zavalishin, who arrived aboard the warship *Kreiser* in 1824. This handsome young officer actually took up residence in a room in the Presidio of San Francisco, which he had redone by the ship's carpenters to be more comfortable—something that apparently endeared him to the young ladies of the Presidio. Zavalishin provides an extended account of his meeting with the Indian insurgent leader Pomponio, who at the time was jailed at the Presidio. Although this document has been published before in the *Southern California Quarterly*, Gibson has reworked his translation and annotations for this new volume. The observations of Captain Vasily Golovnin on the occasion of his visit to Bodega Bay and his subsequent interactions with Chief Valenila of the Bodega Miwok comprise another account of interest to ethnohistorians and anthropologists.

The book includes 13 color illustrations (including an early map of San Francisco Bay), most of which are depictions of California Indians sketched by artists Louis Choris and Mikhail Tikhanov; these (although perhaps well-known from other publications) are very nicely reproduced. For some reason, the captions on the Choris drawings give the date of their creation as 1818, when in fact Choris made the drawings in 1816 while aboard the *Ryurik*, commanded by Otto von Kotzebue.

While the first-hand accounts are very valuable, I would caution the reader about some of the broader historical pieces, since the information in these was usually gathered second-hand from local people. If you bear in mind the fact that few of the Russians spoke Spanish, you can understand how details may have been mangled in translation. One of the most intriguing journal accounts (and one that is truly available for the first time in English) is that of Nikolay Shishmaryov, who arrived in San Francisco aboard the Sloop *Blagonamerenny* in the winter of 1820–21. He made the rounds of the various missions and the Presidio at the interesting point in time at the end of Spanish rule over California. He provides many details about life at the missions, including a wonderful account of the celebration of the feast day

of the Virgin of Guadalupe (another description of this event appears in the writing of Karl Gillsen in this same volume). He also provides one of the earliest descriptions of a Russian ship's crew building brick ovens along the decaying walls of the San Francisco Presidio in which to bake fresh bread and rusks for the long sea voyages ahead. I found this fascinating because it shed light on the enigmatic account in Richard Henry Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast* of finding an enormous Russian oven built on the shore of San Diego Bay. The Shishmaryov mention affirms that this was perhaps commonly done by the crews of Russian ships.

Any new collection of first-hand accounts is a thrilling find for students of the history of early California, and this new work by James Gibson will provide valuable new sources to mine for a better understanding of that history. While there are several important accounts written by English-speaking authors about early California (e.g., Robinson, Dana, Atherton, Phelps, etc.), they mostly cover the 1830s and later; many of these new items elucidate life in the mid-1810s and early 1820s, and so add considerably to our knowledge of this period. Gibson's excellent translations make these pieces a good read as well as a source of historical documentation.



Nine Mile Canyon: The Archaeological History of an American Treasure

Jerry D. Spangler
Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2013,
208 pages, 116 color photos, 52 black and white
illustrations, 4 maps, \$34.95 (paper).

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Nine Mile Canyon is an international treasure, well known to Utah natives, archaeologists, and rock art aficionados worldwide. Over 10,000 recorded prehistoric rock art sites run along the canyon's 45-mile stretch at the heart of the

West Tavaputs Plateau, but that is not all it has to offer. There are many dozens of enchanting and sometimes bewildering archaeological sites and structures that have led many on a mission to understand the prehistoric occupants of Nine Mile Canyon. Spangler begins not by describing Nine Mile Canyon to the reader but rather by leading the reader through the history of exploration and research in the area, as described in the journals, maps, correspondence, and reports of the people who have worked there over the last century and a half. He continues this theme as he explores the changes in archaeology as a discipline in Utah and the greater Southwest, and how many key players in this evolution have had some connection, however small, to Nine Mile Canyon. The main focus of this history is not Nine Mile Canyon itself; instead, the canyon is used as a lens for exploring a set of