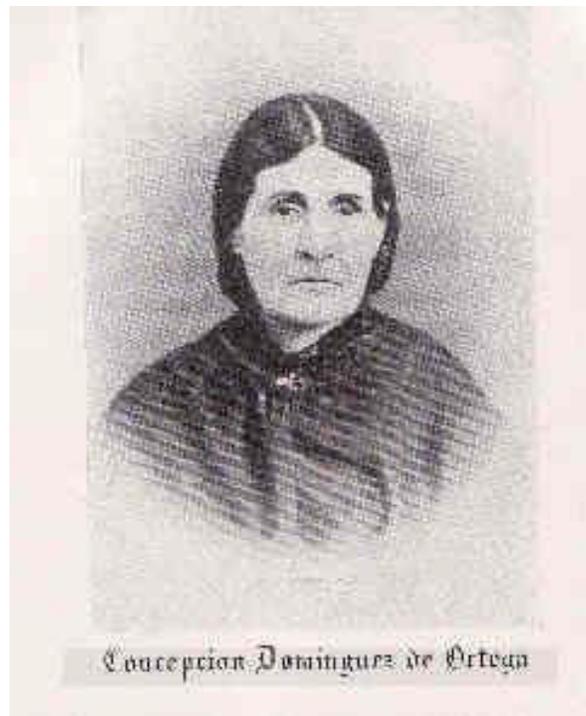


Did You Know? **By Clem Dougherty**

DID YOU KNOW...that Alaska was once a Russian colony? Yes, it's true. In the early 18th century the Russians came to Alaska in search of a small sea-faring animal known as the sea otter. In 1742 Vitus Bering, a Danish explorer in the service of Russia, discovered the Bering Sea and the coast of Alaska which teemed with thousands of sea otters. In the 18th century sea otter pelts were highly prized articles of clothing. Upon Bering's discoveries several Russian companies soon established colonies off the Alaskan coast for the purpose of harvesting the sea otters. In hunting the sea otters the Russians employed Aleutian Indians who in their canoes became expert at spearing the tiny animals. A profitable trade arose between the Russians in Alaska and the Chinese on mainland China where the Russians (sometimes employing American and English ships as transporters) traded sea otter pelts to the Chinese who used the pelts for hats and for decoration on the bottoms of their long silk robes. As part of the trade the Chinese gave to the Russians silk, porcelain, and other Chinese goods.

In 1799 the Russian Tsar Paul I designated the Russian American Company as the exclusive agent for hunting sea otters in Alaska and other parts of North America. The Russian American Company was a Russian corporation in which the Tsar, other members of his royal family, and other Russian nobles held stock. The headquarters of the Russian American Company were at what is now Sitka, Alaska. By this time the Spanish had succeeded in colonizing California and had established a strong policy forbidding any trade between the Spanish in California and all foreigners including the Russians.



Concepcion Arguello

In 1806 Count Nikolai Rezanov, the Tsar's chamberlain, traveled on official business to Sitka where he found the residents to be starving and in need of a permanent supply of grain, meat, fruit and vegetables. Accordingly, Rezanov sailed south to California where, in spite of the Spanish embargo on trade with foreigners, he hoped to trade Russian goods for food for Sitka. Upon reaching San Francisco Bay on April 5, 1806, Rezanov found the Spanish Comandante of the presidio to be Jose Dario Arguello who had a daughter named Conception Arguello. Conception Arguello also known as Concha Arguello, as she was called by her family, was born at the presidio in San Francisco in February of 1791. By the time Rezanov arrived in San Francisco Bay, Conception Arguello was 16 years old and was reputed to be the most beautiful woman in Alta California. Breaking the Spanish ban on foreign trade, the Spanish including Comandante Arguello, welcomed into their homes Rezanov who returned the good will with gifts of Russian goods. It was not long before Conception and Rezanov fell in love and decided to marry. Because she was Catholic and he was Russian Orthodox, both needed approval of the marriage from their respective Catholic and Russian authorities. In Rezanov's case the Tsar and the Russian Orthodox Patriarch in St. Petersburg had to approve. Rezanov then set sail from San Francisco with a ship full of food supplies for Sitka .

Departing from Sitka, Rezanov then returned to Siberia, and while crossing Siberia to reach St. Petersburg, Rezanov died accidentally, the nature of the accident not being clear. In any event, he never reached St. Petersburg. In the meantime Conception waited for his return to California not knowing that he had died. She waited for years and never married. After some time had passed, rumors reached California that Rezanov had died, and in 1847 some 36 years after Rezanov sailed to Alaska, his death was confirmed. However, upon waiting for his return, Conception turned more and more to religion and joined the Third Order of St. Francis (a lay organization attached to the Franciscan Order) to devote her life to teaching poor children and attending to the sick. In 1851, three years after Rezanov's death was confirmed, Conception entered the convent operated by the Dominican Sisters in Monterey and became their first native California born novice. When the convent moved from Monterey to Benicia in 1854, Conception went with them, The Sisters operated St. Catherine's convent and school in Benicia from 1854 to 1966. It was at St. Catherine's that Conception remained for the rest of her life teaching poor children until her death on December 23, 1857, at the age of 66.

Today, if you travel to the Dominican cemetery that sits on a wind-swept hill above the town of Benicia overlooking the Carquinez Straits, there in a simple grave lies Sister Mary Dominica also known as Conception Arguello.

In 1812 the Russians did come south to California and established Fort Ross on our Sonoma County coast – a story that will have to wait for another day.

(Sources: Rawls and Bean: California, An Interpretive History, 9th Ed., pp. 54-55; Kent Lightfoot: Indians, Missionaries, and Merchants, pp.51-52; pp.115-118; Douglas Kyle, editor: Historic Spots In California, 4th Ed., p.334; pp. 469-470; pp. 474-475; Bickford O'Brien, Ed: Fort Ross-Indians-Russians-Americans, p.9)