



Title: A Collection of Californian Plants

Author(s): John Thomas Howell

Source: Fort Ross Conservancy Library

URL: <http://www.fortross.org/lib.html>

Unless otherwise noted in the manuscript, each author maintains copyright of his or her written material.

Fort Ross Conservancy (FRC) asks that you acknowledge FRC as the distributor of the content; if you use material from FRC's online library, we request that you link directly to the URL provided. If you use the content offline, we ask that you credit the source as follows: "Digital content courtesy of Fort Ross Conservancy, www.fortross.org; author maintains copyright of his or her written material."

Also please consider becoming a member of Fort Ross Conservancy to ensure our work of promoting and protecting Fort Ross continues: <http://www.fortross.org/join.htm>.

This online repository, funded by Renova Fort Ross Foundation, is brought to you by Fort Ross Conservancy, a 501(c)(3) and California State Park cooperating association. FRC's mission is to connect people to the history and beauty of Fort Ross and Salt Point State Parks.

A COLLECTION OF CALIFORNIAN PLANTS

By John Thomas Howell

For a collection of herbarium specimens to encircle the earth in order to be named is a rare occurrence, and yet such a collection recently came to me for study. The much-traveled specimens would be noteworthy if only because of their extended journeying; but this particular collection holds a special interest for us who live in California because the plants were collected by the Russians in 1840 and 1841 immediately before they abandoned their Californian colony not far north of San Francisco. Until recently the existence of this unnamed collection in the herbarium of the great Russian Academy of Sciences in Leningrad was not generally known, and indeed it would seem likely that the memory and knowledge of these early Californian specimens had passed even from the minds of Russian botanists. More recently, the bundles were rediscovered, and, together with other American collections, were sent for determination to Dr. Ivan M. Johnston at the Arnold Arboretum. Recognizing the particular interest that would be attached to this set of plants by Californians, Dr. Johnston inquired if I would like to see and name the collection. The opportunity to examine these early California specimens was eagerly and gratefully accepted; and so it happened that the specimens after encircling the earth came to be named less than 100 miles from where they were collected nearly 100 years ago and where their descendants still flourish on the maritime bluffs and mesas or in the interior hills and valleys (1).

An interesting chapter in Californian history is recalled by this collection (2). Early in the winter of 1841, after twenty-nine years of occupation, the Russian colonists left Ross on the Sonoma coast of California (3). The attempt to establish a permanent colony in California had failed because the enterprise had not proved profitable to the Russian American Company which was primarily interested in revenue from sea otter and seal hunting on the California coast and in the development of agricultural activities. After the decision of the company in the spring of 1839 to dispose of its Californian holdings, a purchaser had been sought in the Mexican pueblos of Sonoma and Yerba Buena, but finally the property was sold to Capt. John A. Sutter of New Helvetia (Sacramento).

In June, 1841, just a few months before Ross was finally evacuated and while negotiations for the disposal of the properties were assuming form, one of the chief accomplishments of the Russian sojourn was realized, the ascent and naming of Mt. St. Helena, the most conspicuous landmark in the coast Ranges immediately north of San Francisco Bay. It seems probable that the one who initiated this undertaking and was responsible for its success was E. Voznesenski (4), scientist-naturalist from the zoological museum of the Russian Academy in St. Petersburg. Voznesenski, 24 years of age when he came to California in 1840, was a trained entomologist and his collections of insects from various parts of central California have become classical; but only now, after all these years, is it known to us that he also collected plants, the same plants that came back to us in California to be identified.

A COLLECTION OF CALIFORNIAN PLANTS

By John Thomas Howell

For a collection of herbarium specimens to encircle the earth in order to be named is a rare occurrence, and yet such a collection recently came to me for study. The much-traveled specimens would be noteworthy if only because of their extended journeying; but this particular collection holds a special interest for us who live in California because the plants were collected by the Russians in 1840 and 1841 immediately before they abandoned their Californian colony not far north of San Francisco. Until recently the existence of this unnamed collection in the herbarium of the great Russian Academy of Sciences in Leningrad was not generally known, and indeed it would seem likely that the memory and knowledge of these early Californian specimens had passed even from the minds of Russian botanists. More recently, the bundles were rediscovered, and, together with other American collections, were sent for determination to Dr. Ivan M. Johnston at the Arnold Arboretum. Recognizing the particular interest that would be attached to this set of plants by Californians, Dr. Johnston inquired if I would like to see and name the collection. The opportunity to examine these early California specimens was eagerly and gratefully accepted; and so it happened that the specimens after encircling the earth came to be named less than 100 miles from where they were collected nearly 100 years ago and where their descendants still flourish on the maritime bluffs and mesas or in the interior hills and valleys (1).

An interesting chapter in Californian history is recalled by this collection (2). Early in the winter of 1841, after twenty-nine years of occupation, the Russian colonists left Ross on the Sonoma coast of California (3). The attempt to establish a permanent colony in California had failed because the enterprise had not proved profitable to the Russian American Company which was primarily interested in revenue from sea otter and seal hunting on the California coast and in the development of agricultural activities. After the decision of the company in the spring of 1839 to dispose of its Californian holdings, a purchaser had been sought in the Mexican pueblos of Sonoma and Yerba Buena, but finally the property was sold to Capt. John A. Sutter of New Helvetia (Sacramento).

In June, 1841, just a few months before Ross was finally evacuated and while negotiations for the disposal of the properties were assuming form, one of the chief accomplishments of the Russian sojourn was realized, the ascent and naming of Mt. St. Helena, the most conspicuous landmark in the coast Ranges immediately north of San Francisco Bay. It seems probable that the one who initiated this undertaking and was responsible for its success was E. Voznesenski (4), scientist-naturalist from the zoological museum of the Russian Academy in St. Petersburg. Voznesenski, 24 years of age when he came to California in 1840, was a trained entomologist and his collections of insects from various parts of central California have become classical; but only now, after all these years, is it known to us that he also collected plants, the same plants that came back to us in California to be identified.

The collection contained 346 specimens representing 214 species and varieties. The specimens were collected in 1840 and 1841, in general a fairly representative collection of specimens from the flora of present-day Sonoma County: a number obviously from the coastal hills and mesas in the immediate vicinity of Ross, and others from the interior. Some certainly from Mt. St. Helena. But whether the specimens originated on the coast or in the interior, most of the labels accompanying the specimens carry only the printed data, "California boreal. Ross.--leg. Wossnesensky", and on only a few appear more definite designations of locality in script. Thus on a rare and unusual form of *Eriogonum Vimineum* is the notation "Fl. Slavjana", that is, the Slav or Russian River; a specimen of *Anaphalis Margaritacea* is labelled "Bodega"; and on yet another, *Erodium Cicutarium*, is the note "Rio San Ignacio". One of the most interesting of these special designations is "m. St. Helenae et desertum St. Rosae", the mountain of St. Helen and the desert of St. Rose. In June 1841, in the heat of early summer, as Voznesenski and his party traversed the hot and desiccated country beyond Santa Rosa in his ascent of Mt. St. Helena, well might he have called it a desert. Those inhabitants of Sonoma county who now live between Santa Rosa and Mt. St. Helena would probably not be highly edified to hear their home district called the Santa Rosa Desert, but one can well imagine the feelings of Voznesenski and his companions as they traversed the brushy hills and mountains. The hardships endured and the difficulties surmounted can be vividly imagined by those who are acquainted with the region, and the label on these plants tells in one word, *desertum*, that the first ascent of Mt. St. Helena was not easily accomplished. It is to be regretted that no account by any member of the party who made the historic ascent is known. Among the specimens that carry this thought-provoking label are plants from the chaparral of the interior hills and mountains such as *Adenostoma fasciculatum*, *Pickeringia montana*, and *Eriodictyon californicum*, as well as such herbs as *Calochortus amabilis*, *Silene californica*, *Hypericum concinnum*, *Antirrhinum vagans*, *Antirrhinum virga*, and others.

Regarding the data on the labels, it only remains to be noted that while most of the specimens are credited to "Wossnesensky", eight were collected by Kuprianov, governor of Russian America at the time Ross was abandoned. Some of the specimens are also accompanied by notations of specific date and locality in Russian script on small bits of paper, evidently clipped from the original papers in which the specimens were prepared.

Among the most interesting plants represented in the collection are the weeds. Although the weeds are not numerous, the few that there are furnish definite evidence of the occurrence of certain species even at so early a date. Two species of filaree which are now among the most abundant plants in the lowlands of California are in the collection, *Erodium cicutarium* and *E. moschatum*. *Poa annua*, *Silene gallica*, *Raphanus sativus*, *Malva* sp. (seedling), *Amagallis arvensis*, and *Physalis exocarpa* are other widely naturalized weeds of today which are included in the collection. Other plants in the collection definitely of garden origin which have never become naturalized are *Pisum sativum*, *Ruta graveolens*, *Althaea rosea*, *Borago officinalis*, and *Lycopersicum esculentum*. And it is of special interest to note those plants which are sometimes regarded as doubtfully indigenous to California: *Arabis glabra*, *Fragaria chiloensis*,

Geranium carolimianum, *Oxalis corniculata*, *Apocynum cannaginum*, *Prunella vulgaris*, and *Solanum nigrum*.

While there is some botanical interest in the weeds of the collection, no extraordinary scientific interest is to be attached to the native species represented, most of which are not uncommon and can still be found in the hills and valleys of Sonoma County. But in passing it is interesting to note that, whereas the Russian collectors neglected to obtain a specimen of the glory of the northern California Coast Ranges, the Redwood, they did find several plants relatively rare, such as *Trifolium amoenum* Greene and *Antirrhinum virga* Gray, as well as the most robust specimen of *Orthocarpus pusillus* known to me, a plant more than 6 inches tall. But by and large, this set of plants offers a striking and impressive instance of what value accrues to a collection which is thoroughly studied and reported in botanical literature, and what happens if such studies are not made. Many plants in the collection were unknown to science when they were collected and if by a bit of diligent research they had been sought out and named, the collection would now rank with those obtained by Nuttall, Douglas, and Hartweg, and by the earlier Russian collectors, Langsdorff, Chamisso, and Eschscholtz. As it is today, Voznesenski's California collection is just another set of Sonoma County plants as far as scientific value is concerned; and what might have proved a classical collection of California plants is noted here as something of merely botanic-historical interest. If things botanical had been done differently in old St. Petersburg, I would not have had the interesting experience of working over these plants in San Francisco so near to their original home; and instead of going to the Gray Herbarium or to Kew to study rare and precious types of certain species, Californian botanists would be journeying to Leningrad to learn what certain types collected by Voznesenski are really like!