

MEMORIES OF FORT ROSS 1920-1937
by Laurie Horn, granddaughter of George W. and Mercedes Call

The *Call Ranch House Historic Structure Museum Furnishing Plan* focuses on the early American ranching years at Fort Ross, 1885-1920. Laurie Horn was a child just following those years, and her memories give us an important glimpse of the years immediately following that era when Mercedes Call continued to live in her home on the Call Ranch. Her mother, Laura Call Carr, tells of the earlier period in *My Life at Fort Ross 1877-1907*. The booklet is a Fort Ross Interpretive Association publication which will be updated and reprinted in 2002-2003.

The roads leading into and through Fort Ross were quite different. Coming up Highway One the road past Aunt Ceda's (Eckert) is pretty much the same until you leave Fort Ross Gulch. When you came out of Fort Ross gulch, there was a road turning abruptly to the right to go up to Seaview Road by way of the Fort Ross Road. We called this the lane and it is where we went to pick wild strawberries and look for Indian findings...The road (Highway One) went directly through the stockade area and then around the corner past the Call House (my grandmother's) and past Uncle Carlos and Kate's house and up past sunset rock and on up the coast to Kolmer Gulch (past Clam Beach). If you wanted to go to the dairy you went up the lane and about half way up there was a gate turning to the left and along the fence and up the gulch to the dairy. Uncle Carlos used the dairy for his sheep—to mark them, to shear them and during lambing.

Another way to get to the dairy was through the yard of the Call House, past the barn where he had his cows and an occasional horse, then continue on to meet the road coming in from the lane. There were many gates, even on Highway One. A gate between the Rule Ranch and the Charles Ranch, another between Aunt Ceda's (Eckert) and Charles Ranch (Aunt Mary's), and another going into the Call Ranch before you get to Fort Ross Gulch. There were gates everywhere! Uncle Carlos loved having little kids along, and he always had a couple of dogs in his pickup. There was a road from the old blockhouse going through the front field around and down to the Sandy Beach. It is exactly in the same place today.

There is a memory attached to Fort Ross that will linger forever: it is the odors of childhood connecting up to the past. The front garden was a wonderful place of color and odors—scented geraniums, violets, honeysuckle, narcissus and that wonderful purple heliotrope by the front gate. There was the ocean smell, the hay at the barn, the woodshed smelling of newly split wood, smoke from the chimney, and the mixture of eucalyptus and cypress in the chicken yard. That is where I spent many hours on my knees, making a farm out of sticks and branches, using rocks and cones for animals. There was water to play in and a nearby berry patch to raid. The chickens were off-limits and penned up, but we teased them with sticks and noises. Underfoot everywhere was wild peppermint and sage. The creek beside the house smelled musty and damp. The cellar smelled of rotten potatoes. We hated the job of sorting them. It was dark and scary besides the smell. Most of all there was the damp strong odor of the ocean at low tide—a fascinating challenge, always changing, but still the same after generations of changing people.

There are three outstanding beaches in my memory. The Sandy Beach, where we always wanted to go (and I still do.) It was the most popular because of the easy access and of course the sand and Fort Ross Creek which was a great place for children. Shallow and warm and full of creepy crawlers. We never had enough time there. I remember my grandmother with her rheumatoid legs wading in that cold seawater—a sure cure. Then there was the Rocky Beach directly in front of the two houses. Over the years Uncle Carlos had many boathouses and even a track extending from the boathouse down into the water for easy access. Once a track was built from the top of the cliff to the beach to slide down boats, motors, etc. About the time I was ten or eleven a group of children made a trail down by the creek, built a bridge and had it enter the back of the boat house. Quite a project, but successful for little children. It went through berries, willows and poison oak, up steep hillsides and through weeds and cactus. I don't remember ever going to Clam Beach, but I recall people talking of how you could go there and just pick up the cockle clams in the gravel. The third beach I'm recalling is Stump Beach, up Highway One on Salt Point Ranch. When Jules Eckert lived there we always held our Easter picnics there. It was a county event and just "Everyone" was there. I associate it with fried chicken, watermelon and huckleberry pie.

Food was a very big part of the life at Fort Ross, with lots of milk, cream and butter. The milk was brought from the barn in buckets, poured into milk pans and put into shelves in a cooler on the porch. Later the

cream was skimmed off and churned into butter. This was a job we all had turns at doing. We loved to start, but hard to stick with and finish. The butter had to be worked with a wooden paddle, the butter milk taken off, the butter washed in cold water, salted, shaped and stored away. Whole milk was always on the table and used for cooking. The skim milk was fed to the pigs. There was venison, quail, fish, abalone, clams, meat and chicken. There was a meat house room in the wood shed with a huge block and screened cages to hang the meat. I don't remember any smoking of meat. Perhaps by the time I was there, it was purchased in town. All the men were good at procuring this food. Even the women loved to go out in the boat and fish. Aunt Emma was the champion. I did well too.

The front garden and back yard were the same all the years I was there as a child. Abalone shells made round beds in the front yard. Wooden planks went from the road to the porch. The big wooden mailboxes were on both sides of the road out in front and a big stump was there for years. The front porch and steps were in constant use. We all sat there and visited and sunned ourselves, even when it was windy and cold. The yard was a banana belt.

Grandma had dark skin and the sun had no bad affect on her. She loved it. Most of the time she and her daughters and granddaughters were walking and working in the yard. Gary, the little bent-over Italian who lived out in a small house by the barn gate, was always there to take the garden cuttings across the road and dump them in the gulch. So now, fuchsias, callas and daturas are all growing across the road. As we enjoyed the garden and worked there, and we all learned about the plants and their habits and origins. My grandmother was very outgoing and loved people and wanted them to feel comfortable at her home and in her garden. No matter how many people came, she always invited them to stay and eat. Her daughters and the cook were always preparing for extras at the table. Grandma had the key to the church in her apron pocket, and after a tour of the church and the other ruins, she would bring them back to her beloved garden. She was always receiving gifts from far away places and plants that would be suitable for her warm protected yard.

In the woodshed there was a huge wooden bin (or box) with a lid. It is still there today and as long as I can remember it was used for chicken feed. Of course that meant rats and mice and that was always a fun place for my cousins and I to try to catch them. We never did, but we ran and screamed and chased them all over the woodshed. The big box came from New York, around the Horn, with a big flat grand piano in it. When George Washington's brother visited him from back east, he was astonished that there were no musical instruments, so he sent the piano, a violin, mandolin and a guitar. So that is the history of the chicken feed bin.

While on the Sandy Beach one of the things we did was to head for the rocks where the wheels were impressed in the rocks. Years ago we discovered a series of wagon wheel impressions in the rocks. I believe there were seven at different angles, but close together. Today, at the last look, there are four and a half, some having tipped over or broken away into the ocean. The rocks were above the high tide mark.

At the Rocky beach, at one time, some geologists or oceanographers installed two steel cables from the bulkhead out to a farther one that was usually under water. We called it the bathtub rock because it was reachable at low tide and there was a bathtub shaped hole in it where abalone could be kept. The two cables were four feet apart and one above the other. A person could walk on one and use your hands on the other. There were some instruments of some kind on the outer rocks. It was off limits, but of course we all went out there more than once. The cables remained there for a year.

In the back yard the big flat stones were at the edge of the porch from front to back. A wooden split log made a dry patch from the back kitchen door to the little picket gate into the side garden. At the end of the porch there was a wooden walkway to the woodshed. The planks were two by twelves and there were four or five of them side by side forming a wide walkway. The woodshed had a wide door and inside was the meat room on the left, a tool shed on the right, and in back all the stacked and split wood for the kitchen stove. In the way back was a fruit closet for canned fruit. Also in the backyard was the "cottage." Built as a school for the Call children, it was later used for the men to sleep in. As I recall, the women and children slept in the house and the men and boys in the cottage. It had a stove and a piano, but no facilities. Behind the sleeping quarters, but with only outside access were two rooms. One was full of canary birds, cages and

empty boxes. The other had canned fruit. All of us girls were expected to learn to care for birds—wash the seed and water cups, clean and replace paper in the bottom of the cages, cutting it to fit, put in feed and water and a nasturtium or chick weed for each bird. The room had a musty fertilizer smell. It may have had a small window, but no ventilation. We couldn't leave the door open because of the cats. I guess we all hated that job, but we did it. I can't remember hearing them sing or having one in the house. Later there was an aviary in the back yard. Grandma had a tame parrot named Polly. She kept it in the dining room. Everyday she took the cage outside and let Polly sit on the top of the cage. She could rub his tongue and I think he said a few words.

Behind the men's dining room towards Uncle Carlos' house there was a narrow bridge made of two long logs with lumber nailed on top, wooden limb banisters on both sides and a gate at the far end. This went to Kate's house where there were always fresh cookies. Being of German heritage, she was an excellent cook and good hostess.

Extending over the creek towards the chicken yard was a building used as a garage. That is also where the machinery was to make electricity. When the gasoline engine was started it made an awful smell, puffed out black smoke and made a popping noise. I guess it was called a generator. I think we called it the electric plant. When you walked by the exhaust pipe, it blew hot air on you. Next to this building was a wide crude plank bridge going to the chicken yard and vegetable garden and berry patch. On the right was the proverbial "outhouse" with two holes. A small hole with a step to accommodate the little folks, and the larger big hole for adults. There were catalogs to use for paper, and a box of ashes to dump in the hole. It did have a door, but by the time I was there the door hinges were rusted and it wouldn't shut. This building was called the "Chin-chiney." My mother said when they used the out-house when they were little, they would go there and the door would be shut. So they would say "little pig, little pig, let me come in." The sisters would reply, "no, no, by the hair of my chiny chin chin." So, the name "chin'chiny"—meaning the outside toilet. It was completely covered by ivy and even when it got old, and should have fallen down; I think the large ivy stems held it up.