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POTRERO BRANCH  
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REFERENCE

# The Molokans

## A little-known sect on Potrero Hill

NEAR THE CREST OF POTRERO HILL, on the northern slope, the First Russian Christian Molokan Church stands like an improbable memorial to the ethnic and religious diversity of San Francisco. The building is plain; but for the sign, in Russian and in English, over the door it might be anything from an apartment building to a union hall. The inside is even less suggestive of its real function. The downstairs is a large room with chalkboards, and upstairs is a kitchen and another large room, empty but for wooden benches and a table. No altar, no crucifix, no candles, no stained glass, no pulpit. The chandeliers suggest that the main room is either unfinished or being prepared for a paint job, neither of which is true, since it has been this way since the building was erected in the early Twenties.

It is the *Sobranie*, the meeting house, the place where a religious sect of Russian-American Protestants known as Molokans congregate to worship God.

The story of the Molokan community in San Francisco is one of those curious chapters in the City's history that gets "curiouser and curiouser" the more you look. Chances are you never heard of them, yet a sizable number of Molokans have lived on the same part of Potrero Hill for over 70 years.

The Molokans, which in Russian means "Milk Drinkers," came to San Francisco, via Galveston, Texas, in 1905. In Russia they had long been a persecuted minority, since Orthodoxy was very nearly the state religion. From their founding in 1765 until 1805 they had met only in strict secrecy. Czar Alexander I granted them religious freedom in 1805, but unofficial persecution continued. When the Russo-Japanese war of 1905 brought the prospect of military conscription to the pacifist Molokans, they decided it was time to leave. About 5000 came in a group to the United States that year and settled mainly in Los Angeles and on San Francisco's Potrero Hill, which at that time was relatively barren and uninhabited. Many early settlers worked at the Tor-

res Rag Factory at the foot of the hill. Others worked as stevedores.

In 1917-18 another large group arrived, fresh from the turmoil of the Russian Revolution. The last sizable immigration of Molokans came in the late Thirties, escaping the Chinese Revolution. Since the Church won't allow an outsider access to its official archives, it is impossible to determine just how many Molokans have lived on the hill at any one time. Today, roughly 500 remain in San Francisco.

What's remarkable about the Molokans, and sets them apart from the majority of their fellow countrymen in San Francisco, is that they have tenaciously held to the old ways. To see an elderly Molokan couple on the street is to be jettisoned back to turn-of-the-century Russia. The old men sport long, flowing beards and wear the traditional Russian shirt: high, round collar and buttons halfway down the left breast. His wife may be wearing an ankle-length white dress with elaborate hand embroidery around the cuffs and the neck and down the front, and an embroidered white veil. The younger women wear dresses no less elaborate, but compromise with modernity to the extent of having them knee length and colored. Sunday brings out the finest attire, though the older Molokans dress traditionally every day.

*San Francisco* was permitted to attend a Sunday Thanksgiving service, including a banquet following, with one stipulation: no cameras inside the church. Many of the members had been fasting for the three preceding days and attending evening prayer meetings. The service was conducted entirely in Russian, which is the primary, and in some cases, the only language of the Molokans. The minister is a man elected by the congregation to lead the meeting, though most of the church elders participate in the service. The entire two-hour service is devoid of all ritual, in keeping with their belief that salvation is achieved through a personal relation with God, not via rituals or symbols.



which explains the absence of any crosses or icons in the church. The longest part of the meeting consisted of elders who each read passages of gospel, followed by brief commentaries and interspersed with beautiful hymns, which the entire congregation chants. The high point of the meeting occurs near the end when most of the elders, men and women, rise from their benches, chant a solemn hymn and proceed to atone for

their sins through open weeping and wailing. That done, noses blown, eyes dried, they sing a few more hymns while the younger men remove the benches and set up long tables for the banquet.

The meal was a feast of traditional food served in a traditional manner. The Molokans continue to use carved, wooden spoons to sup the cabbage borsht, and the salad, prepared on the table, is eaten on bread like an open sandwich.

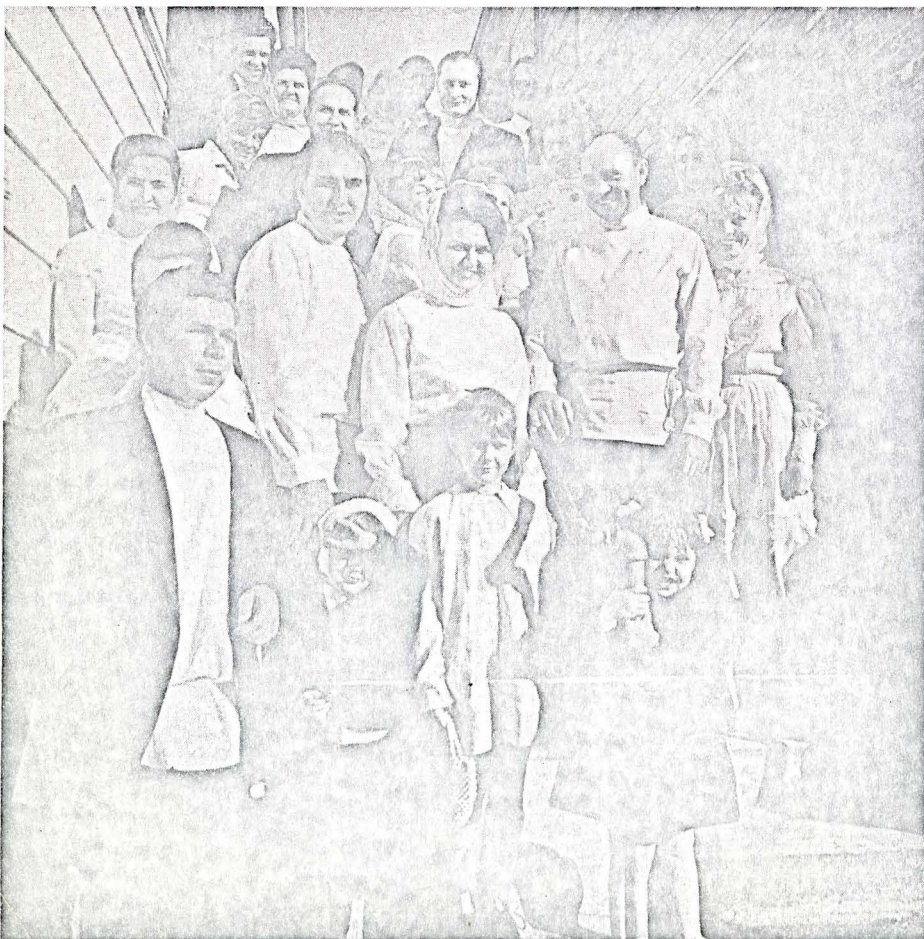
Tea is taken with a spoon rather than drunk from the glass, and the meat course, served on a large platter set in the middle of the table, is taken in small and repeated quantities and again often eaten on bread. The women are responsible for preparing the salads, serving the borsht, cutting the meat and preparing the fruit. Throughout the meal different people rise to either read from the Bible or offer prayers. A young man acts as an official "admonisher" throughout to see that everyone listens to the speakers. The meal lasts for an hour, then more hymns are sung and Bible readings offered. The younger members tended to drift away, leaving the elders to continue the meeting alone.

Outside, the young and middle-aged gathered to have their pictures taken and tell us about their church, while the solemn chanting continued inside the walls. Except for the remarkably beautiful dresses and the high-collared shirts, they may have been any second- or third-generation group of Americans. They're relatively affluent, educated, and most of them speak respectable English. The children, of course, speak better English than Russian. They're proud of their traditions, though the younger people seem to value them mostly for their uniqueness. They're well aware that with the passing of the older generation, the traditions will also pass into obscurity, as many of them already have. As the children marry into non-Molokan families they find new, European-American religions. The sect is slowly diminishing, at least in San Francisco, and the young Molokans acknowledge the fact with only a hint of regret. Several young, college-educated women with whom we spoke expressed a desire to begin documenting the history and tradition of the church while there is still time.

After nearly six hours of prayers and hymns, the elders emerged from the church into the late afternoon sun. The young people had gone their own ways, and the elders, bent and wrapped against the November chill, helped one another up and down the steep hill to their nearby homes. Vasily Petrovich Semenoff, 83 years old, and his wife Alice stopped to talk briefly with us, mostly through an interpreter. He had come to San Francisco as a young man in 1911, settled on the hill and worked in the shipyards below. In 1923 he had returned to Russia, hoping to stay but, finding conditions intolerable, he returned to the City in 1926. He remembered helping to build the church, and he spoke of the old days when meetings were held in private homes. He laughed when we asked him if we could take his picture, and answered, "OK, I am not afraid of nobody." □



*The Molokans—(Above) Vasily Petrovich Semenoff, 83, and his wife. (Below) Members of this Potrero Hills sect, garbed in traditional dress, pose just outside their church after a Thanksgiving service.*





## THE ORIGIN OF THE MOLOKAN SECT

**A** BRIEF survey of the religious situation in Russia, prior to the recognition of the Molokans as a unified group, is necessary if one is to appreciate their contribution to religious thought and accomplishment. While the Molokans have thus existed as an organized body since the eighteenth century, their spiritual history began two centuries before their formal organization.

The Russian people adopted Christianity from the Eastern or Greek Church, in 988,\* during the reign of Prince Vladimir, and the Orthodox Church has since been known as Greek-Russian. The earliest appearance of Spiritual Christians was during the Sixteenth century.

History records that a general knowledge of the Bible was brought to the Russian people in the 16th century by an English physician who had been summoned to Moscow. This Englishman's name is now forgotten, but it is known that he made the acquaintance of a prominent Tambov Squire, of the Imperial Court, and that the two frequently discussed the Bible, the possession of which was strictly prohibited in Russia at that time. It was a clever servant of the Squire, however, Matvei Semienov, rather than the Squire himself, who grasped the eternal truths of Biblical teaching and became instrumental in their dissemination among the spiritually-hungry Russian people.

Semienov became so interested in his new faith that he rebelled at praying before man made ikons and soon began to neglect entirely the rites of the Orthodox Church. Having obtained a Bible, he commenced to preach on the worship of God in spirit and truth to those with whom he had frequent contact. A few of his followers, influenced by his example and aided by the Bible, cautiously followed in his footsteps and began to teach the same doctrine. Semienov's failure to observe the rites of the Orthodox Church soon attracted the attention of the authorities and a criminal tribunal sentenced the unfortunate man to death, through the torture-execution of "wheeling." The teachers among his followers were also discovered and the empowered clergy cruelly sentenced them to life exile and hard labor.

In 1740, Ilarion Pobirohin, ultimately the founder of the Dukhobor sect, was approached by a Quaker visitor of foreign origin and the two developed a great friendship in spiritual matters. Semien Matveevich Uklein, who later organized the Molokans, also became acquainted with Pobirohin at about this time. Uklein and Pobirohin, through a seeming agreement in faith, remained close friends until differences over the authenticity of Biblical teaching eventually parted them, presumably in 1765.

Uklein possessed a thorough knowledge of the Bible and his belief was based upon the written law of the Old and New Testaments. He was an eloquent speaker, unusually energetic, and, being a tailor by trade, traveled extensively from village to village. His wide contacts gave him an unusual opportunity to preach the Gospel and to spread his spiritual beliefs among the Russian people. Out of his efforts arose the Molokan sect.

The word Molokan (from *moloko*, milk) means "drinker of milk," and various reasons have been given for its use as the name of a Christian sect. There is a strong belief that its use refers to the fact that Molokans did not forbid the drinking of milk during religious fasts, as did the Orthodox Church, or that it is symbolic of their doctrine as "*spiritual milk*," mentioned in Hebrews 5:12 and I Corinthians 3:2. The name certainly has no connection with the fact that the Czar removed the members of this sect to the River Molochnaia as some writers have suggested. The Tambovsk Consistory strengthened this fact in its reports to the Holy Synod as early as 1765, when it referred to members as Molokans, and at that time they had not yet been sent to Tauria.

In concluding, it seems sufficiently important to report that the Quaker religion exerted a strong influence on the organization of the Molokan sect. In 1740, as has already been mentioned, a foreigner of the Quaker faith became acquainted with Pobirohin, the founder of the Dukhobor sect, from which came forth Semien Matveevich Uklein, the founder of the Molokan sect.

\* REFERENCES — Smirnov, *Istoria Khristianskoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi*, pp. 151, 222, 223; Morosoff, *Molokane*, pp. 4, 6; *Livanova Book*, vol. 1, pp. 169-176; Brockhaus-Efron, *Entsiklopedicheski Svar*, 1890-1904, vol. XI, pp. 251, 252, vol. XIX, p. 644.

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