Marin Conservation League
Walk Into (Conservation) History #11
China Camp State Park

Saturday, May 5, 2012

Marin Conservation League
1623-A Fifth Avenue, San Rafael, CA 94901  415.485.6257  marinconservationleague.org
Marin Conservation League was founded in 1934 to preserve, protect and enhance the natural assets of Marin County.
Today’s Walk

Our walk begins at the north kiosk entrance to the Park and parking lot for Back Ranch Meadows camping area. We will follow the Shoreline Trail that ascends slightly and then follows the contour in and out of the wooded canyons of San Pedro Ridge, crosses the Back Ranch Fire Road, and loops back to the south side of parking area. Here, with views out across the salt marsh to the North, we continue on the Shoreline Trail to San Pedro Road, cross over to Turtleback Hill, and follow the .9-mile Turtle Back Nature Trail counter-clockwise around the hill for close views of the salt marsh. We return to San Pedro Road to complete the walk to the parking area.

Along the way we will take a number of stops to relate stories from China Camp State Park’s distinctive cultural history, describe its varied plant communities and their ecological importance, recount the threats that prompted citizens to join together to save San Pedro Ridge and Bay shore from development, and talk about how to help the Friends of China Camp keep the Park open against the odds of closure due to State budget short fall.

MCL’s previous Walks into (Conservation) History have celebrated other public lands and bay shores in Marin that came into public ownership only with a huge collaborative citizen effort to advocate for preservation, gain public and political support, and campaign for funds to acquire the lands. China Camp State Park is no exception.

Introduction

As early as 1957, a state report had recognized that “this area (should) be included in the State Park System to meet existing and future public needs.” That report suggested a park of 2,700 acres, with 6 miles of shoreline on San Rafael and San Pablo Bays. In 1970, the Association of Bay Area governments (ABAG) proposed a greenbelt plan that called for a major San Pedro open space preserve, a wide park on the top of the north face of the ridge down to the shoreline.

By the time the vision of preservation evolved from possibility to probability in the mid 1970s, the flatter, south-facing San Rafael side of the Peninsula was filling in with subdivisions, marinas were closing in the shoreline, and affluent homes were beginning to creep up the wooded slopes. Beyond Santa Venetia, the northern side still remained almost unchanged. How it happened that three public parklands (San Rafael’s Harry Barbier Memorial Park, Marin County’s San Pedro Mountain Preserve, and China
the name “China Camp” has come to include a much broader swath of land and shoreline of San Pedro Point. A simple description of China Camp can be found in an early Environmental Impact Report written in 1974 by Bob Young, a Marin Conservation League volunteer at the time, in support of the proposal to designate China Camp as a State Park:

“Special features of the site include: three to four miles of Bay shoreline (beach, cliffs, mud flats, salt marsh); the historic China Camp settlement that was home to thousands of Chinese in the late 1970s and early 1880s; two still existing Indian mounds, likely there are more; four major canyons and many small ones, from the Bay shore to the hill crest of over 1,000-foot elevation; tens of thousands of shorebirds as well as numerous species of freshwater and upland birds. . .

“The site, if acquired for the public, would preserve the last place in the entire Bay Area where an unimpaired natural landscape stretches from Bay shore to mountain top. While there are a few existing bay shoreline parks around San Francisco Bay, they do not meet all of the qualifications above; each lacks one or more of these attributes.”

Indeed the site was acquired for the public; these words could be written today and still be an apt description.
Coast Miwok Habitation

The conditions of San Pedro Point were also ideal for the first settlers, the Coast Miwok, whose habitation of Marin and Southern Sonoma Counties goes back several thousand years. Oak groves—at least four different species—were abundant on the slopes of San Pedro Peninsula, furnishing acorns as a food staple. Mounded deposits of centuries reveal a subsistence lifestyle based on abundant clams, mussels, and abalones, and wild game. Miwok villages were scattered throughout Marin and southern Sonoma counties and inhabited by a population of several thousand natives. Numerous remains have been found in the park. Within 100 years of the arrival of the Spanish and establishment of the San Francisco Mission in about 1776, however, most of the Miwok were wiped out. A few have survived.

The Spanish influence waned after the Mexican war of independence in 1821, and during a period of a dozen years before the American takeover in 1846, the Mexican government awarded enormous land grants—21 in Marin County—that would dictate the development of the county for decades to come. San Pedro Peninsula was one of three parts of the 21,678-acre Rancho San Pedro, Santa Margarita, and Las Gallinas land grant held by Timothy Murphy. On his death in 1953, the Ranch San Pedro was divided into a number of properties. In 1869, brothers John and George McNear bought 2,500 acres, including five miles of shoreline on Point San Pedro—from Chicken Point on the south side, all the way through what is now China Camp State Park. It included the 10 to 15 acres of land that would be occupied by a Chinese fishing village.

China Camp Village

As news about the discovery of gold in California spread around the world in the late 1849, hundreds of Chinese immigrants joined in the rush to the gold fields. Unfortunately, their plan to make enough money to return home and buy farmland fell short of expectations for many reasons, and as a consequence, families were stuck in the states. They turned to laboring on railroads and in industries for survival. In the late 1860s, a number of Chinese laborers ended up producing bricks for the McNear family and constructing San Pedro Road. On the side, they more found another, more profitable way to earn a living, i.e., harvesting San Francisco Bay’s abundant shrimp at Point San Pedro.

It was not a coincidence that many of the immigrants had come from Canton on the delta of the Pearl river; at that time it was the only open port in China. It was also the location for centuries of shrimp harvesting, and the Bay shared many of the same conditions. What started in 1870 as a colony of some 77 Chinese shrimpers harvesting at Point San Pedro grew by 1875 to 26 shrimping villages around the bay Area. San Pedro remained the largest center of
farming; the second major shrimp fishery was off Hunter’s Point in San Francisco. Using special bag nets that could capture the floating shrimp as the tide swept in, the shrimpers would release the catch onto junks and sampans. They exported dried shrimp to Chinese communities throughout the world, and sold the larger female shrimp to restaurants in San Francisco. Nothing was wasted; males were dried and sold as flavoring, and the heads, tails and exoskeletons were crushed and sold as chicken feed.

By 1880, the population of China Camp Village had swelled to several thousand, as unemployed Chinese sought refuge from discrimination elsewhere in California. For shrimp production, however, 1885 was the peak year. After that the fortunes of the Chinese shrimpers began to decline, due in part to a declining shrimp population, and in part to discriminatory legislation that required the purchase of special licenses, forbade traditional Chinese fishing techniques, limited the fishing season, prohibited export of dried shrimp, and restricted the size of the catch. At the same time, massive amounts of sediments from hydraulic mining in the Sierra Nevada were circulating in the Bay, covering the salt grass habitat essential for maturing shrimp with mud. Except for minimal harvests, the industry had dried up by 1915, and all but disappeared by 1930.

Shrimp villages were abandoned, but China Camp village managed to survive due largely to a family store that served the locals. Frank Quan, a descendant of Quan Hung Quock (who is thought to have started the village store) rented boats and continued to legally harvest shrimp and sell it as bait to local fishermen.

China Camp Village enjoyed a fleeting moment of fame in 1954 when it became the location for the shooting of “Blood Alley”, starring John Wayne, Lauren Bacall, and Anita Ekberg. Many Chinese were brought over from San Francisco, dressed in coolie garb, and filmed as fleeing refugees, in the shadow of a replica of the Great Wall on the hill above.

Development Threats

In the early 1960s, the vision of Marin Headlands’ Marincello had not yet come into public view. The threat of filling Richardson Bay for a huge residential and marina development had been crushed. But other large tracts of privately-owned land seemed destined for development. Property on San Pedro Point owned by the McNear family for decades had been sold and ultimately about 1,800 acres were acquired by Chinn Ho of Hawaii. As Peacock Gap...
continued to develop to the south, it was feared that China Camp, too, would fall before the bulldozers—before the distant dream of an historical park could become a reality.

In October 1962, George Epidendio wrote in San Francisco Magazine of the impending death of China Camp village: “Soon on the spot where the weathered shacks of what remains of China Camp presently stand, a new community will arise—A magnificent suburban development known as Marin Bay. And when China Camp is swallowed by progress, the final death blow will then progress through the final rituals of life in the same manner as does a dying Chinese. Another bit of California will bow to the inevitable bulldozer in 1963.”

In 1969, the Marin County Board of Supervisors, focusing on the McNear’s Beach area of the Peninsula, agreed that a bayfront park was badly needed and were able to obtain state and federal funding to acquire the immediate area of McNear’s Beach, but that left the remainder of the Peninsula still vulnerable to development.

For many people, their first introduction to China Camp was the Renaissance Faire, which held its first event in Marin County in 1967 on Point San Pedro. (In 1970 the Faire moved to Black Point). That was Louise Kanter’s (now Lipsey) first encounter. And she “immediately fell in love with the beauty of China Camp.” When she moved to Peacock Gap with her family a few years later, she began to hear rumors of major plans by Gulf Oil Company to develop a city of potentially more than 30,000. (China Camp was then zoned industrial.) San Rafael stood to annex the new community.

In early 1971, against great odds, Louise began a door-to-door campaign to alert citizen interest. She encountered strong pro-development interest but was undeterred, especially after she had an opportunity to covertly see the blueprints for Gulf Oil’s massive development. Louise started soliciting help from various conservation organizations and received extraordinary assistance from Bob Young, a volunteer with the Marin Conservation League. She also formed a group called the Save the San Pedro Peninsula along with Elizabeth (Tina) Ferris and Sandy Hanson (now Koshani), and the group began holding public meetings in April 1972.

Louise was then appointed to the newly formed San Rafael Citizens Open Space Committee, which ended up playing a pivotal role. While Louise served on the Committee, Bob Young walked every inch of the China Camp area

China Camp Needs You!
Visit friendsofchinacamp.org to help keep this historic park open!
and prepared totally on his own and without any compensation an excellent and comprehensive EIR (environmental impact report). When Louise presented Bob’s EIR to the Open Space Committee, they initially vehemently objected to it being done without permission, and a very dramatic and intense battle ensued. Finally the Committee voted to endorse the EIR, and sent it on to Marin County Supervisor Robert Roumiguere.

Seeing Bob Young’s EIR motivated Roumiguere to enthusiastically take up the cause and spearhead the campaign to get Governor Jerry Brown to sign the bill establishing China Camp State Park in 1976. China Camp State Park opened in 1977, and the village store was allowed to remain. Frank Quan continued his bait sales; the cafe remains in operation; and occasionally Georgette, who runs the cafe, makes fresh shrimp cocktail.

In 1979, China Camp Village was added to the U.S. National Register of Historic Places in recognition of its settlement, architecture, commerce, and social history.

**Later Issues**

Even after the victory that culminated in China Camp becoming a State Park in 1976, some controversies lingered:

- In 1978, MCL wrote the State Park and Recreation Commission that China Camp should be classified not as a recreational park but as a State Park. “We particularly oppose allowing any use by off-road vehicles.”
- In 1979, critics vocally opposed the State’s plan to install new facilities such as water, sewer and electrical hook-ups, and paved roads, calling this a “blight on the unspoiled natural setting” and an attempt to transform China Camp Village into “Disney-style pseudo-history.” (San Francisco Bay Guardian, January 11, 1979)
- In 1989, an environmental impact report concluded that new restrooms and facilities to provide access for disabled (in compliance with Americans with Disabilities Act) at Back Ranch Valley Campground would “not have a negative effect on the environment.”
- In 1990, China Camp “regulars” were furious about a $5.00 parking fee that would soon go into effect and urged support to block the charge (Marin IJ, October 23, 1990) In fact, China Camp began charging $3.00 per car in 1992, and fees have steadily increased since.
- Over the years, MCL wrote to alert State Park authorities of the presence of feral cats and red fox, both of them non-native predators that needed to be controlled from preying on native wildlife.

**China Camp State Park faces possible closure**

By this time, most people are aware that proposed budget cuts for the State of California include scheduled closure of China Camp State Park—along with as many as 60-some other parks statewide—on July 1, 2012.

Friends of China Camp has taken an active role in efforts to keep the park open, including raising funds and working with the State and community and cultural organizations to prevent the loss of this unique ecological, cultural, and recreational resource.

**To keep China Camp State Park open, go to www.friendsofchinacamp.org to see how you can help.**
This **Walk Into (Conservation) History** has been made possible by these sponsors of Marin Conservation League’s “75th Anniversary Celebration”

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**UPCOMING EVENTS**

**THURSDAY, MAY 17**  
7:30—9:00 am  
**Business—Environment Breakfast**  
“Polychaetes don’t vote! The politics of ocean protection”  
Embassy Suites, San Rafael  
Speaker: Marine expert Ed Ueber  
Tickets are $25 for MCL members and $30 for non-members  
Register at marinconservationleague.org or call 415-485-6257

**SATURDAY, JULY 28**  
Noon to 3:00 pm  
**MCL’s annual Picnic on the Porch**  
MCL offices, 1623-A Fifth Avenue, San Rafael  
Free for MCL members; $5 for non-members. Bring your family and friends!  
(please note the new, earlier start time)
## Plant Communities at China Camp

**A partial list, compiled by Katherine L. C. Cuneo, Ph.D.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community Name:</th>
<th>Community Location:</th>
<th>Woodland Stream</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coast Live Oak Woodland</td>
<td>Exposed hillsides along trail</td>
<td>Canyon and stream course</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Characteristic Plant Species:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Associated Plant Species:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Coast live oak</td>
<td></td>
<td>Snowberry</td>
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<tr>
<td>California bay or laurel</td>
<td>Umbellularia californica</td>
<td>Symphoricarpus albus var. laevigatus</td>
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<tr>
<td>Madrone</td>
<td>Arbutus menziesii</td>
<td>Heteromeles arbutifolia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Western poison oak</td>
<td>Toxicodendron diversilobum</td>
<td>Frangula [Rhamnus] californica</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Associated Plant Species:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sisyrinchium bellum</td>
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<tr>
<td>Snowberry</td>
<td></td>
<td>Iris douglasii</td>
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<td>Toyon</td>
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<td>Iris macrosiphon</td>
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<td>California coffeeberry</td>
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<td>Pedicularis densiflora</td>
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<td>Blue-eyed grass</td>
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<td>Mimulus aurantiacus</td>
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<td>Douglas iris</td>
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<td>Chlorogalum pomeridianum</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ground iris</td>
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<td>Arctostaphylos manzanita ssp. manzanita</td>
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<td>Indian warrior</td>
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<td>Aesculus californica</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sticky monkey-flower</td>
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<td>Quercus lobata</td>
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<td>Soap root</td>
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<td>Cynoglossum grande</td>
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<tr>
<td>Manzanita</td>
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<td>Quercus kelloggii</td>
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<tr>
<td>California buckeye</td>
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<td>Lonicera hispidula var. vacillans</td>
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<td>Valley oak</td>
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<td>Houndstongue</td>
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<td>Black oak</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wild honeysuckle</td>
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<td>California bay or laurel</td>
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<td>California polypody fern</td>
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<td>California maidenhair fern</td>
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<td>Goldback fern</td>
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<td>Fetid adder’s Tongue</td>
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</table>
**Community Name:** Willow Thicket  
**Community Location:** Low elevation stream course

Characteristic Plant Species:
- Arroyo willow
- “Himalaya” blackberry
- California blackberry
- Rush
- Cattail

**Community Name:** Salt Marsh  
**Community Location:** Marsh plain around Turtleback

Characteristic Native Plant Species:
- California cord grass
- Common pickleweed
- Saltgrass
- Salt marsh gumplant
- Fleshy jaumea

Associated Species:
- Alkali heath
- Arrow-grass
- Seaside arrow-grass
- Fat hen
- Salt marsh rosemary
- Goldenthread
- Alkali bulrush
- Frankenia salina
- Triglochin concinna
- Triglochin maritima
- Atriplex triangularis
- Limonium californicum
- Cuscuta pacifica
- Bolboschoenus robustus

**Community Name:** Salt Marsh  
**Community Location:** Marsh plain around Turtleback

Characteristic Plant Species:
- Salix lasiolepis
- Rubus discolor
- Rubus ursinus
- Juncus sp.
- Typha sp.

**Community Name:** Non-native Grassland, being restored to needlegrass grassland  
**Community Location:** Exposed hillsides and valley bottom

Characteristic Plant Species:
- Wild oat (introduced annual*)
- Soft Chess (introduced annual*)
- Ripgut grass (introduced annual*)
- Italian ryegrass (intro. perennial**)
- Filaree (intro. forb***)
- Purple needlegrass (native perennial)
- Sun-cups

Associated Plant Species:
- Coast live oak
- Toyon
- Valley oak
- Coyote brush
- California poppy
- Sticky monkey-flower
- Mule’s ears
- Iris
- Poison oak
- Tar plant
- Gold fields
- Houndstongue
- Soap root
- Lupine
- Owl’s clover
- California buttercup

*annual= germinates from seed each year, produces seed and dies, dead plant retains few nutrients.
** perennial= remains alive for more than one season; retains nutrients in leaves or stores in roots
*** forb= soft, non-woody stems, leaves, flowering plant.