

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



**Saturday,
May 5,
2012**

Legend			
	Major Road		Campground
	Paved Road		14-50 Campsite Number
	Unpaved Road		Food Services
	Accessible Trail		Group Picnic Area
	Multi-Use Trail		Locked Gate
	Accessible Multi-Use Trail		Marsh Area
	Intermittent Stream		Museum
	State Park Boundary		Parking
			Picnic Area

Marin Conservation League Walk Into (Conservation) History # 11

CHINA CAMP STATE PARK

MAY 5, 2012 – 9:30 to 1:00

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

Walk Leaders:
Yvonne Brown, Friends of China Camp
Louise Kanter Lipsey, Community Activist
Kathy Cuneo, Ph. D., Botanist
Nona Dennis, Marin Conservation League

how to help the Friends of China Camp keep the Park open against the odds of closure due to State budget shortfall.

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



Dru Parker

Camp State Park) came to encompass more than 2,500 acres of the San Pedro Ridge and Bay shore by the late 1970s is the success story of citizen action. Our focus is on one of those parklands – the woodlands and marshes, flora and fauna, and rich cultural history that became a State Park in 1976.

China Camp and Point San Pedro: Setting and context

Viewed from the air, Marin County is dominated by its highest peak, Mt. Tamalpais. To the south and east, the mountain descends as a series of ridges that become three peninsulas extending into San Francisco Bay: Tiburon, San

Quentin, and San Pedro. Of these, the San Pedro Peninsula is the most rugged. John Hart in 1970 called it “as close to wilderness as anything in East Marin.” The area originally known as China Camp Village occupies an area near the northeast end of the Peninsula, but



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



Flora of China Camp—(L–R): Star lily (Zigadenus fremontii), Coast live oak (Quercus agrifolia), Indian warrior (Pedicularis densiflora)

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.



Photo credits: Claire Woods, Dru Parker, Philip Bouchard

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,



Don Barrett

Above: The shrimp fishing village and pier today; Below: A wooden crate painted with images of two children, now in the China Camp Village museum.

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



Rene Rivers

fishing; 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



Native fauna of China Camp—(L—R): Coyote(*Canis latrans*), California clapper rail (*Rallus longirostris obsoletus*), Bobcat (*Lynx rufus*)

Photos by Len Blumin

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



The Turtle Back Nature Trail

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](http://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"

MOUNTAIN LION \$2500 or more

Bunker & Company
Ken Drexler & Sarah Leach

COOPER'S HAWK \$1000— \$2499

Marin County Board of Supervisors
Marin County Parks
Redwood Landfill, Inc.

ELK \$500 — \$999

Angel Island Association
Bank of Marin
Nona Dennis
Cordy Hill, *in memory of Robert Royston*
Jack Krystal
Marin Sanitary Service
Nardell Chitsaz & Associates

BAY LAUREL \$250 — \$499

Bruce Dodge & Wendy Wyse
Barbara Ford
Jan Hamrin & Tim Rosenfeld
Paul Helliker
Kathy & Rick Lowrey
McPhail Fuel Co.
Dudley & Sarah Allen Miller
Dorothy & Roger Roberts
Grace & Larry Smith

LUPINE \$100—\$249

Friends of Susan Adams
Janet Allen
Juliette Anthony
Bartlett Tree Experts
Amy Belser
Betsy & Dan Bikle
Derek and Tymber Cavasian
Phyllis Faber, *in memory of Peter Behr*
Bruce Fullerton & Antonina Markoff
Barbara George
Jana Haehl
League of Women Voters of Marin
Joan Lubamersky
Sue MacMillan, *in memory of Alex MacMillan*
Marjorie Macris
Marin Fence Co.
Barbara & Bernie Meyers
Ellen & Peter Obstler
Michelle Passero & Ira Chin
Edith Piltch
Seagate Properties, Inc.
Jean Starkweather
Susan & Brian Stompe
Wanden P. Treanor & Judge Faye D'Opal
Julia Violich
Periann Wood & Doug Wilson



Protecting Marin Since 1934

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)

*Walk Into (Conservation) History —China Camp State Park
©2012 Marin Conservation League
Text by Nona Dennis
Design and production by Dru Parker*

Plant Communities at China Camp

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

COMMUNITY NAME: COAST LIVE OAK WOODLAND
COMMUNITY LOCATION: EXPOSED HILLSIDES ALONG TRAIL

Characteristic Plant Species:

Coast live oak	<i>Quercus agrifolia</i>
California bay or laurel	<i>Umbellularia californica</i>
Madrone	<i>Arbutus menziesii</i>
Western poison oak	<i>Toxicodendron diversilobum</i>

Associated Plant Species:

Snowberry	<i>Symphoricarpos albus var laevigatus</i>
Toyon	<i>Heteromeles arbutifolia</i>
California coffeeberry	<i>Frangula [Rhamnus] californica</i>
Blue-eyed grass	<i>Sisyrinchium bellum</i>
Douglas iris	<i>Iris douglasii</i>
Ground iris	<i>Iris macrosiphon</i>
Indian warrior	<i>Pedicularis densiflora</i>
Sticky monkey-flower	<i>Mimulus aurantiacus</i>
Soap root	<i>Chlorogalum pomeridianum</i>
Manzanita	<i>Arctostophylos manzanita ssp manzanita</i>
California buckeye	<i>Aesculus californica</i>
Valley oak	<i>Quercus lobata</i>
Houndstongue	<i>Cynoglossum grande</i>
Black oak	<i>Quercus kelloggii</i>
Wild honeysuckle	<i>Lonicera hispidula var. vacillans</i>



COMMUNITY NAME: WOODLAND STREAM
COMMUNITY LOCATION: CANYON AND STREAM COURSE

Characteristic Plant Species:

Coast live oak	<i>Quercus agrifolia</i>
California bay or laurel	<i>Umbellularia californica</i>
California polypody fern	<i>Polypodium californicum</i>
California maidenhair fern	<i>Adiantum jordanii</i>
Goldback fern	<i>Pentagramma triangularis</i>
Fetid adder's Tongue	<i>Scoliopus bigelovii</i>

Associated Plant Species:

Snowberry	<i>Symphoricarpos albus var laevigatus</i>
Toyon	<i>Heteromeles arbutifolia</i>
California coffeeberry	<i>Frangula [Rhamnus] californica</i>
Coast redwood	<i>Sequoia sempervirens</i>
Douglas fir	<i>Pseudotsuga menziesii var. menziesii</i>
Indian warrior	<i>Pedicularis densiflora</i>
Yerba buena	<i>Satureja douglasii</i>
Star lily	<i>Zigadenus fremontii</i>
Common horsetail	<i>Equisetum arvense</i>
Valley oak	<i>Quercus lobata</i>
Houndstongue	<i>Cynoglossum grande</i>
Soap root	<i>Chlorogalum pomeridianum</i>

Plant Communities at China Camp

(continued)

COMMUNITY NAME: WILLOW THICKET
COMMUNITY LOCATION: LOW ELEVATION STREAM COURSE

Characteristic Plant Species:

Arroyo willow	<i>Salix lasiolepis</i>
“Himalaya” blackberry	<i>Rubus discolor</i>
California blackberry	<i>Rubus ursinus</i>
Rush	<i>Juncus sp.</i>
Cattail	<i>Typha sp.</i>



COMMUNITY NAME: SALT MARSH
COMMUNITY LOCATION: MARSH PLAIN AROUND TURTLEBACK

Characteristic Native Plant Species:

California cord grass	<i>Spartina foliosa</i>
Common pickleweed	<i>Salicornia pacifica</i>
Saltgrass	<i>Distichlis spicata</i>
Salt marsh gumplant	<i>Grindelia stricta var. angustifolia humilis]</i>
Fleshy jaumea	<i>Jaumea carnosa</i>

Associated Species:

Alkali heath	<i>Frankenia salina</i>
Arrow-grass	<i>Triglochin concinna</i>
Seaside arrow-grass	<i>Triglochin maritima</i>
Fat hen	<i>Atriplex triangularis</i>
Salt marsh rosemary	<i>Limonium californicum</i>
Goldenthread	<i>Cuscuta pacifica</i>
Alkali bulrush	<i>Bolboschoenus robustus</i>

COMMUNITY NAME: NON-NATIVE GRASSLAND, BEING RESTORED TO NEEDLEGRASS GRASSLAND
COMMUNITY LOCATION: EXPOSED HILLSIDES AND VALLEY BOTTOM

Characteristic Plant Species:

Wild oat (introduced annual*)	<i>Avena fatua and A. barbata</i>
Soft Chess (introduced annual*)	<i>Bromus [mollis] hordeaceus</i>
Ripgut grass (introduced annual*)	<i>Bromus diandrus</i>
Italian ryegrass (intro. perennial**)	<i>Lolium multiflorum</i>
Filaree (intro. forb***)	<i>Erodium botrys, E. cicutarium</i>
Purple needlegrass (native perennial)	<i>Nassella [Stipa] pulchra</i>
Sun-cups	<i>Camissonia ovata</i>

Associated Plant Species:

Coast live oak	<i>Quercus agrifolia</i>
Toyon	<i>Heteromeles arbutifolia</i>
Valley oak	<i>Quercus lobata</i>
Coyote brush	<i>Baccharis pilularis</i>
California poppy	<i>Eschscholtzia californica</i>
Sticky monkey-flower	<i>Diplacus aurantiacus</i>
Mule’s ears	<i>Wyethia spp.</i>
Iris	<i>Iris macrosiphon</i>
Poison oak	<i>Toxicodendron diversalobum</i>
Tar plant	<i>Hemizonia spp.</i>
Gold fields	<i>Lasthenia spp.</i>
Houndstongue	<i>Cynoglossum grande</i>
Soap root	<i>Chlorogalum pomeridianum</i>
Lupine	<i>Lupinus spp.</i>
Owl’s clover	<i>Orthocarpus spp.</i>
California buttercup	<i>Ranunculus californicus</i>



Ground iris, California poppy and Poison oak by Ernest Clayton Wildflower Images. Gleece’ prints, 6” x 11”, available for sale at Marin Conservation League. \$40 each, call 485-6257 for details.

* 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.