

CHINA CAMP HISTORY

The land in the China Camp area was first settled by the Coast Miwok Indians whose archeological remains in the form of mounds have been found in the area surrounding China Camp.

The Chinese began infiltrating and settling around this Cove in the early 1800's but it wasn't until the Anti-Oriental Crusade that there were an abundance of people striving to exist in this small community. The Camp was used as a relay point for coolie laborers on the Central Pacific Railroad of which many were smuggled in at night and then sifted into work crews of the railroad. The railroad was completed in the first part of 1880 and many Chinese being out of jobs rushed to San Francisco for work. This brought an uprising against the Chinese for the take-over of many white jobs and Dennis Kearney launched the attack to drive the Chinese out of San Francisco in 1882. This brought a mass infiltrating and settling of over 3000 Chinese in the area known as China Camp today and around 7000 others in the close vicinity.

The discovery of a large shrimp bed (one of only two shrimp beds ever recorded in the Bay) in the Cove brought a new life, money and a basis for existence to the community and it prospered.

In 1910 the State of California planted a large number of Sea Bass in the Cove and put strict restrictions that they were not allowed to be caught by nets. This brought many problems to the fishermen, because they were bringing bass and other fish up in their nets with the shrimp. Because some of these fish started being shipped overseas the State started imposing fines and a lot of the inhabitants left to pursue different jobs. Quan Hock Quoek stayed behind after everyone else had left and through a friend developed a net which would release the larger fish while trapping the shrimp. He formed the company of Yick Quen which was responsible for the major supplying of the whole bay area with shrimp. Henry Quan took over after Quan Quoek and also prospered on the shrimp hauls. Henry is probably best remembered and associated with China Camp along with his wife Grace still carrying on the business as though Henry were there. Their eldest son Frank now runs the shrimping aspect of the business.

The bass and larger fish started taking their toll on the shrimp in the 1920's and then bay pollution, (both chemical and silt deposits) finished them almost completely according to Mrs. Quan and Frank.

In 1954 the Camp achieved momentary fame during the filming of Blood Alley starring John Wayne, when it was turned into a Chinese Village filled with fleeing refugees with a replica of the Great Wall of China on the hills above it. For the two months the set was being used, there was probably as much excitement as the founding of the Camp itself.

Today all that survives the once bustling village are a number of run down shacks and a pier with a small snack shelter where Mrs. Ouan still provides drinks etc. for frequent visitors and fishermen.

Artists are very frequent visitors to this magnetic like attraction, the most prominent being John Sackas, a San Francisco artist best noted for his paintings of China Camp which he spent two years capturing on canvas.

The Ouans are the only family occupying China Camp and have been for the past 20 plus years, with the exception of a caretaker who is there only part time when Frank needs odd jobs done around the Camp. Shrimping is still carried on by Frank and he says its sort of like the weather, sometimes good, sometimes bad.

China Camp on warm weekends is frequented by 400 or more people so the Ouans say; mostly visitors, with many artists coming to capture the historic remains and people using the beach for sunning.

The use of the beach is quite heavy on weekends with many people coming, as Frank says, "to enjoy the surroundings in an unpressured atmosphere." People seem to have a feeling of freedom and that is why he has never pushed the Camp as a recreational facility. He says the beach is quite changeable in that some storms leave the beach very smooth and sandy while others leave it quite rocky. There used to be tables to picnic on but heavy use wore them out and they were never replaced.

The boat launch is not used very frequently and only when the tide is high due to the increasing amount of silt buildup. Many times, he says, boats get stuck in the mud when people don't know of the tides.

Group usage is irregular but Frank says he has quite a few calls from groups wanting to visit but he tells them there are no facilities for picnics except for the Beach. Most come anyway he said, and pick isolated portions of the beach to congregate. Groups come from all over the surrounding area he said, mentioning Martinez, Vallejo, San Francisco, Corte Madera, etc; and mostly school groups with art classes that spend the day. The College of Marin has been using the area for over 20 years as an outside lab for their art classes.

Besides the groups, many just come for the scenic or painting aspect because of the peaceful atmosphere.

The snack bar provides refreshments for all and has been in operation for over 50 years, and is presently run by Grace.

The parking lot, I estimate, will hold about 30 to 40 cars and Frank says that there have been occasions when people had to park upon the hill overlooking Rat Island. If people are driving very fast at all, they will very easily by-pass the turn-off, especially if you are coming from the Peacock Gap area northward.

July 1969
Jerry Rumburg

China Camp History (cont)

Although feeling there is political involvement in acquiring the China Camp land and being disappointed nothing has been done sooner, Frank and Grace still feel quite strongly about the history of the Camp as a whole and feel the history will remain even though it might be made into a Riviera before the County can purchase it. He hopes the land can be purchased "for the people's sake", because there is only one other beach along the Bay for public use and that being Paradise Beach.

They feel the location of China Camp is much better climate wise, being warmer and having less wind than Paradise Park.

For the past 10 to 15 years the Camp has been threatened to be swallowed by progress. If not purchased by the County, the Camp will be dealt its final death blow by the inevitable bulldozer and will progress through the final rituals of life to be no more. except in the eyes of those who have seen and remember China Camp as it really was.

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