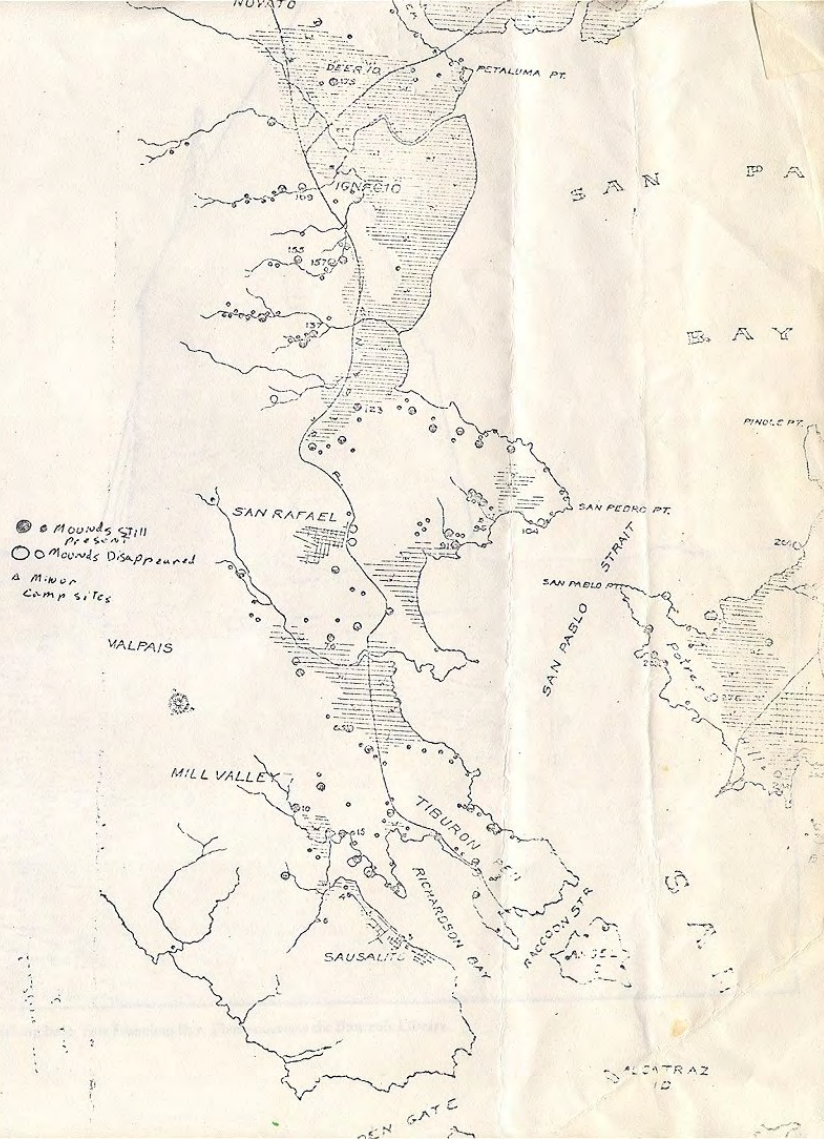


China Camp

By Richard Dillon/Number Three in the 1972 Keepsake Series
The Book Club of California

Not all of the Chinese who retreated to California after the 1869 driving of the Last Spike at Promontory, Utah Territory, put an end to their railroad careers became cooks, waiters, shoemakers or cigar rollers in San Francisco. Since their native province of Kwangtung or Canton had hundreds of miles of coastline, many of Charley Crocker's graders and tracklayers were ex-fishermen. It was only natural that some would pick up lines, hooks and nets when they cast down their C.P. R.R. picks, sledges, spikes and tie plates. The Asians found that California waters teemed with salmon, bass and sturgeon, and such shellfish as clams, crabs, abalone and shrimp.

During the 1870's Chinese fishing colonies began to appear from Monterey Bay to Tomales Bay. Two major shrimp fisheries were off Hunter's Point in San Francisco Bay and Point San Pedro on Marin County's San Pablo Bay shoreline. Between tiny Rat Island and McNear's Beach on the north side of Point San Pedro a shallow cove became the site of China Camp, the only surviving Chinese fishing village in California. Its ten to fifteen acres lay about 200-300 yards below the residence of Richard Bullis.



- Mounds still present
- Mounds Disappeared
- M-War Camp sites

SAN FRANCISCO BAY

VALFAIS

MILL VALLEY

TIBURON PENINSULA

SAUSALITO

RED GATE

SAN RAFAEL
SAN PEDRO PT.
STRAIT
SAN PABLO PT.
SAN PABLO

SAN FRANCISCO

ALCATRAZ ISLAND

PINOLE PT.

FOLGER

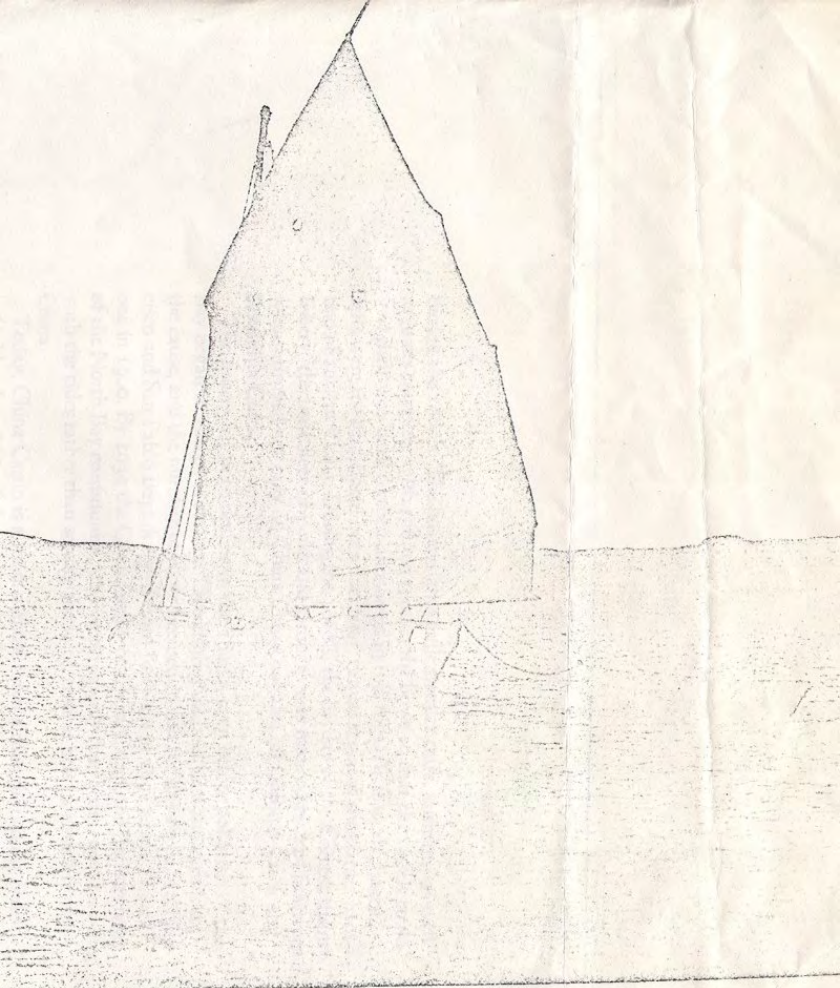
RICHARDSON BAY
RACCOON STRAIT

According to tradition, the latter leased the area from George P. McNear and his brother, pioneer Marin brickmakers, for \$1,000 a year then sub-leased it to the Chinese fishermen for \$3,000. Bullis and his brothers had originally sold 700 acres of Point San Pedro to the McNears in the 1860's then, only a few months later, bought back a 365-acre parcel. Presumably China Camp Cove lay just beyond Bullis' property.

Anti-Chinese discrimination was rampant in the 1870's and the Chinese fishermen used Bullis as their contact and "front" with the San Francisco market. He was also captain of their little fleet. Californians did not approve of Chinese skippers of vessels of any size so it was Bullis who took the shrimp to 'Frisco and it was he who brought back from Redwood City the 900 cords of wood China Camp used up each season. In 1880 a law was passed to bar Chinese entirely from commercial fishing but it was found unconstitutional only two months after enactment. Some of the hostility was perhaps justified since the so-called Celestials were even more ruthless exploiters of California's fisheries than 19th Century *Anglos*. They had learned of the tasty *Crango franciscorum*, the so-called San Francisco Bay shrimp, from eight Italian shrimpers who used felucca-rigged boats and seines in deep water. Not only did finely-meshed nets imported from China drive the Italians out of business but thirty percent of the Orientals' catch tended to be young smelt, perch, flounders, sole, tomcod, anchovy, bass and sculpin. These were often too small to eat and too far gone to throw back, so the Chinese used them to "dress the soil" of China Camp. Behind the thirty to forty shacks near the water's edge were truck gardens for long beans and *bok choy*.

But the real fertilizer industry at China Camp was in the hulls retrieved after the shrimp were dried and threshed in clearings made in the brush of the hillside behind the cove. Twenty to thirty tons of shrimp a week were prepared for sale. The San Francisco market could take only a small part of the catch in fresh shrimp, which sold for 8¢ to 14¢ a pound. The rest was dried for shipment to China. The shells were sent too, to nourish the worn-out soils of the Old Country. Selling at \$20 a ton, the shells returned the Marin County Chinese a profit of \$5 a ton after all expenses.

Rickety piers stretched into the water and the stakes to which the shrimp nets were attached extended for a mile or more into the flats of San Pablo Bay. There were boathouses and marine ways as well as homes in China Camp. The editor of a mugbook history of Marin County noted a thirty-five foot craft and a forty-footer on the ways when he visited the cove



Chinese fishing boat, San Francisco Bay. Photo courtesy the Bancroft Library.

during the 1880's. The boatwrights built smaller craft, sampans, as well as junks complete with painted eyes on the bows so that the vessels could find their way back to their anchorage in tule fogs. At first, the lateen sails were the traditional ones but, later, canvas replaced the slatted bamboo of ancient China. During the 1880's, the heyday of the Chinese shrimp fishery, the little fleet of junks and sampans was manned by 225 fishermen who shrimped not only off China Camp but also off Gallinas Creek and Petaluma Creek.

The fishery began to decline in the 1890's, even before pollution of the Bay began to affect the shrimp. Overfishing with set nets and trawls was the cause, and the number of boats licensed to fish for shrimp in San Francisco and San Pablo Bays dropped from forty-six in 1891 to only thirty-one in 1900. By 1930 the Quan family of China Camp, the last survivors of the North Bay community, was working only four boats, now trawling with the tides rather than setting the long, conical nets imported from China.

Today, China Camp is almost a ghost town although its quiet is disturbed by the whine of the outboards of sport fishermen who use the old *embarcadero* and buy a little shrimp for bait. In 1958 the property passed from the McNear family to Chinn Ho's Hawaiian corporation, Latipac, and it was feared China Camp would fall before the bulldozers. Although this has not yet come to pass, neither has the historical park which Marinites over the years have urged, to save the last remnants of a colorful episode in California's maritime history.

RICHARD DILLON is head of the Sutro Library in San Francisco and one of California's leading historians. In addition to lecturing and writing for numerous major periodicals, he is author of many award-winning books. His latest is a book on the history of the Modoc Wars called Burnt-out Fires to be published by Prentice-Hall.

This series of Keepsakes consists of eleven folders issued by The Book Club of California to its members during 1972. The series was under the general direction of Martin Mitau, and was designed and printed by Clifford Burke at his Cranium Press in San Francisco. The composition is by Mackenzie & Harris, Inc., and the typeface is Goudy's Italian Old Style.
© by The Book Club of California.