

Shrimp, subs, and superstars: the colorful life of China Camp's Milton Quan

By Diane Kay

Photo courtesy of Milton Quan



Ever wonder what it would be like to grow up in a site that is now a state park listed in the National Register of Historic Places? Milton Quan, now age 85, has this rare distinction. He grew up in the village that is now the heart of China Camp State Park. Milt's formative years at "the Camp" provided him with a treasure trove of adventures in the 1940s and '50s.

First, a little back story. In the late 1800s, Milton Quan's grandfather left Shanghai and came to San Francisco. In 1895, to escape discrimination in the city, Milt's grandfather joined other Chinese immigrants at China Camp—one of roughly 25 shrimping villages dotting San Francisco and San Pablo Bays. At its peak, the village had some 500 residents.

In the 1940s, to young Milt, life at China Camp "was like living in Disneyland," with so much to see, do and explore. On busy weekends, dozens of fishing dinghies bobbed offshore. Visitors clamored for fresh shrimp cocktail served by the Quan women, headed up by Milt's mother Grace, plus his Aunt Alice, sister Bertha, and cousin Georgette.

Children had important roles at the village. On weekends, the Quan boys (Milt and brothers Frank and Ollie) would rise at dawn to prep some 50 rental boats. On weekdays after school, Milt made shrimp cocktail with his siblings and cousins. "It was a lot of work," remembers Milt. "We picked through three pounds of cooked shrimp to get just one pound to sell." All for a "salary" of just 35 cents per pound. "Shrimp cocktail was a huge delicacy in those days."

Though he had these and other responsibilities at the Camp, Milt and the other Quan children had plenty of fun and freedom. After a long day of fishing, colorful characters would regale each other with stories and good cheer, including accordion music played by Frank, Bertha, Georgette. Ten-year-old Milt was encouraged to sing along.

One summer morning, mother Grace suggested that Milt load up an old 25-foot-long shrimp boat and take Ollie and friend Tom Beyer on a 10-day trip up the Sacramento River to the Delta. She seemed unfazed that oldest boy was only age 12.

With plenty of holes in the boat's planking, bailing was a main activity. On the way back home, large waves swamped the boat and motor, and the boys drifted helplessly on the bay. Thankfully, the Coast Guard rescued them just in time and phoned Grace Quan back at the Camp. In a step that seems unfathomable in today's world, Grace asked the Coast Guard to patch up the boat and send the boys on their way back out on the bay. They did.

By 10 p.m. that night, as the boys approached China Camp, Milt's older brother Frank motored out to guide them in. Unfortunately, in full Tom Sawyer mode, the young boys imagined that the single light on Frank's boat belonged to an enemy submarine. They courageously tried to evade the oncoming "sub" until it headed back to shore. Finally, at 3 a.m., the boys came to shore at China Camp, greeted with a hot breakfast served by Grace. The next day, they found the boat had sunk.

Another adventure changed the course of Milt's life. In 1955, when Milt was 17, Hollywood came to China Camp. For two months, the village was a featured location in the film *Blood Alley*, originally starring Robert Mitchum and Lauren Bacall.

One morning, Milt came upon John Wayne and Robert Mitchum standing on the beach. Wayne had been tapped to replace Mitchum. Milt introduced himself, and The Duke asked Milt to take him to the top of the mountain in Milt's Jeep. For an hour's effort, Milt got \$300—an enormous sum at the time. Milt continued to drive the star around as needed.

Chauffeuring Wayne was just the beginning. For the privilege of filming at China Camp, mother Grace struck a deal with the producers that the Quan family would appear in the movie. On Day One of shooting, Milt served as an extra. Milt caught the director's eye, and was asked to be in several pivotal scenes. Milt had his eye on college, and declined offer after offer to do additional scenes. But with every polite rebuff, the salary went up.

At last, John Wayne prevailed, and Milt was off to Hollywood, first to complete scenes for *Blood Alley*. At 18 years old, our hero was housed at a hotel near Hollywood's famous Grauman's Chinese Theater. John Wayne provided a guide to take Milt out to dinner and show him the town. Later, Milt was trained as a stunt man under Wayne's sponsorship, and learned to box, dance and do horse falls. All this because a *Blood Alley* location scout found China Camp.

Hollywood, however, did not hold the same allure as home, and after three years, Milt happily returned to San Rafael, met his wife, and eventually settled in Fresno. He pursued a career in management at Sears, despite John Wayne's offer of a role in 1967's *Jungle Book*. Quite a trajectory for a boy from a shrimping village on San Pablo Bay!

Visit the setting for Milt's adventures, plus locations that appeared in Blood Alley, at China Camp Village. On weekends, stop by the Village Café where Milt's brother Frank, the last China Camp resident, worked until his passing in 2016.