California State Parks

Video Transcript

China Camp: The Lost Village

Welcome to China Camp State Park. My name is Patrick Robards. I'm one of the rangers here at China Camp. I've been here for 23 years. China Camp is a unique State Park to the California park system. It's one of only two parks that its goal is to tell the story of the Chinese in California. China Camp State Park has another asset to it that's even more unique in that it's the only park, that I know of, in the United States that devotes its theme to the history of the fishing that the Chinese did here at San Francisco Bay and in California.

The history of the Chinese really goes back to the Gold Rush era in 1850. Just after gold was found, there were approximately 50 Chinese here in California. By the 1890s there were 96,000 Chinese here. So we've got a lot of history devoted to their immigration as well as all the other immigrant groups from around the world that came to California. When we start with the history of the Chinese, we've got to start even further back though—in that they brought with them something so unique that they developed a resource that was previously untapped, unknown to Californians and to the rest of the world outside of the small area called the Pearl River Delta area that they came from. So let's go out towards the end of the pier, we'll go back into history to the 1850s when the Chinese came to California.

When they first came here, the Chinese, like most of the immigrant groups, they came to explore, to make their fortunes, here on "Gold Mountain," or the mountains that surrounded the bay. Eventually they would take their profits back to China. The early Chinese worked the gold mines. Later on they worked the Transcontinental Railroad. Later on after that they worked other areas of agriculture.

Those Chinese that came here were recruited, not only from their villages but by some of the entrepreneurs here in California that needed their services, their fortitude, their strengths, in building California. The early Chinese that were recruited brought with them, on about a 60-day voyage from China, their traditions, while the other immigrant groups coming from the eastern coasts, the west coasts of Europe, ultimately when they would get to California they'd blend in—the Irish with the Italians and the French, the Scandinavians, the Portuguese, the English that came here.

Ultimately, in the early 1860s after looking at San Pablo Bay and its untapped resources, they founded villages like China Camp. From that small core of fishermen, using their traditional methods of capturing the shrimp, they built one of the largest fisheries in all of California, sixth in the United States by the 1880s. In the 1860s when they came here, they used their traditional fishing methods. They brought in sampans, small boats, ultimately built up into larger boats, which we call junks today. They would put out fixed nets, small bag nets that would utilize the tides to fill them with shrimp and other small fish, bottom fish mainly. And at

the top of the tide or the bottom of the tide, at slack water, they would harvest these bag nets. A small sampan fifteen feet long with a three-person crew would carry just about an average of three nets. These nets were approximately twenty to twenty-five feet long, about four feet high and about fifteen to twenty feet, at the most twenty-five feet, wide. They'd put them out on fixed poles, and using the currents, both the incoming current and the outgoing current, they'd put them perpendicular to that. As they opened up, cork nets would float to the surface, lead lines, the sink lines, would stay on the bottom. The shrimp would be captured inside those nets. When the current would slack down, they would simply raise the net up with a cord, open up the bottom of the net and into their small sampans put, on an average, about 60 pounds per net. Using the top of the tide at high water or the bottom of the tide at low water, they would bring in about 400 pounds of shrimp per day.

The shrimp that was caught was used as fresh shrimp live, fresh shrimp cooked, or dried shrimp or dried meal. The meal was simply the hulls, the heads, and whatever trash fish may be in there that was cooked. They would dry them on the hillsides that surround China Camp, and after four or five days they would process that shrimp by separating the hulls from the meat. It takes about three pounds of fresh shrimp cooked to make about one pound of dried shrimp product. The fresh shrimp, because of no refrigeration, was either consumed locally or sent down to the cities here in San Francisco or up in Vallejo.

Frank Quan represents the best of China Camp. His grandfather founded a store here in 1900. His father and uncle re-established the fishery under the legislation and under the laws of the 1920s, using the beam trawl, a method that Frank uses up to today. He goes out about six days a week, late at night, early in the morning, catches whatever he can and brings it here to China Camp. China Camp's never lost its form and function. We still carry on the tradition.

Good morning, Frank. Tie off right here?

Of all the shrimp that Frank catches, about 95 to 99 percent is of one species called the bay shrimp. In size they run about three-and-a-half inches at best. The other two species, the horned shrimp and little black tailed shrimp, are seasonal, where these are pretty much year-round. The method that Frank uses is pretty inefficient; he's got to have power to go out, he drops one single net that represents the bag net of the old years. Two or three drags, four, five, six hours later, you'll get a catch of about twenty pounds a bucket. The one I'm holding right here is a little horned shrimp. It actually has a different flavor and a different texture to it. Let me put them in the holding tank here. You can imagine this one basket representing hundreds of baskets that came off with the old traditional shrimping methods and the differences of today's technology.

What Frank's doing today, somebody in the 1870s stood in this identical spot, took baskets of shrimp like this and put them into the next phase of our process—the cooking. They took fresh water, added rock salt, brought it to a boil using coal or wood, cooked the shrimp, eight, ten, twelve minutes. The shrimp went from that natural camouflage color to the bright pink you find in your salads and other dishes. The shrimp will boil, they'll fill with air, and they'll float to the surface, telling you, the cooker, when they're done. You'll stir them occasionally, then you'll put it in the next part of the process—the sorting, where small fish captured with the shrimp, usually was termed as trash fish, are separated out. That product will still be utilized, as is all of the shrimp, and the by-catch used as shrimp meal. The separator, the sorter, was originally

done by hand, so it took a lot of hands to laboriously separate the very large one, that one to five percent of the catch, from the other 95 percent that was put on the hillsides or drying platforms to dry in the sun. As you can see, he's stirring the product, stirring the shrimp. He'll pick one up, taste it, see if it's done to his satisfaction. Like all the other Chinese that were here in California, they were very fastidious as to the quality of their foods. This helped support the industry and probably initially started the industry in that they wanted the best of the best, either the best from their mother, the homeland, or the best products here from California.

Some of the technological advances that were made from the early days to the 1900s was when Frank's father and uncle, Henry and George, added a mechanical shaker to separate the small shrimp, that would fall through the mesh into another tray, from the larger shrimp that was either picked here in China Camp or sent throughout the Bay Area to the markets. It was then taken outside to the hillsides to dry.

If you look at this small street here, this is one of the few streets here in China Camp, and probably one of the few streets of all the camps involved. This building here, which is now our visitor center, would have been the sorting room, where the women and children and men would sort the product, take out whatever trash or bait fish might be in there and size it and get it ready for the next area, which was the drying platform. So this building here, which was the last remaining building from the 1880-1890 period, is now our visitor center. But some of the items that are in this building today came from that era.

You can see old photographs of Chinese mending their nets, old fenders. A sampan here, which was reproduced by the National Maritime Museum in San Francisco, would be the type of vessel that was first used here in China Camp. Generally less than fifteen feet, it would have one sail. And you can visualize three men in this boat going out on this bay, getting the product from three bag nets. Later on I'll describe in detail a junk and what it would represent compared to this, just another step in advance.

After the shrimp was sorted and put on a hillside or on a platform and it dried out, they had to winnow it or crush it. So they used devices like this—old tree trunks that they'd roll back and forth on acres and acres of shrimp. They also wore wooden shoes where they'd walk up and down, crushing the shell. Now it took three pounds of cooked shrimp to get one pound of meat. It took ten pounds of cooked shrimp to get one pound of dried meat. That's how much water was evaporated from this product. The interesting thing, and the fascinating thing, about this is, once dried, this shrimp was like the ultimate dried food. As long as it was kept free from moisture, you could transport this shrimp throughout any part of the world, reconstitute it into soups, into jook, which is a porridge made out of rice, or onto vegetables. It retained its flavor and retained its nutritional value.

As we go further around this room, there is a winnowing machine right here, a fan mill. This machine was originally designed about 300 B.C. This one was here in the camp. It probably was built somewhere around 200 years ago. This machine here was the first invention ever designed by man that had a hand crank on it. Hand cranks led to other inventions later on. But this was really the first of its type. The winnowing machine, or fan mill, was designed to separate the dried shrimp from the meat, so there was a hopper placed right up on top here. The shrimp would go inside, a man would take a crank. He would turn the crank here, turning

a fan inside, which would blow the heavier meat out and down and the lighter shrimp shells out and away from the meat. From the fan mill and what it represents, the technology of 200 B.C.-300 B.C., to the technology of today, the visitor center progresses.

The photographs on the walls show the junks that replaced the sampans. It shows the process, the targets, the weapons. It also describes some of the persecution that the Chinese went though economically. It also talks about some of the people that made these camps famous for the day. Jack London, that wonderful writer of the 1900s, talked about trying to chase these vessels down, these junks, and his inability to capture them because they were so swift. They also talk about how odd they looked to the rest of the people that had never seen them before, with the lanteen sails and their sharp bows, their single sails. The only way, Jack London describes, that they could catch the Chinese is when they were inset; that is, they had their fishing nets out, either bringing them in or setting them in the fishing grounds.

The Charles H. Townsend photo, you can see his signature in the lower left-hand corner, taken probably the same time, shows China Camp's main street—one of the few villages that had a street. On the right would be the wharf and the pier; the drying platforms would be on the left. If you look closely you can see bait, small fish drying, along with some shrimp, in a winnower tucked in between the corner of the buildings. Probably the only camp that actually had a two-story building right in the center of the photo. The lower photo shows a fisherman winnowing probably dried shrimp, putting it into bags and then just smashing the shells into the ground. To the far left, you can see the size and dimensions of a bag of shrimp weighing several hundred pounds. If it was in the shrimp meal form and you couldn't distinguish one product from the next, it would either be dried shrimp or shrimp meal.

This is a photograph of Rat Rock Cove. Looking to the northwest you can see how large that complex was. Right below you in this photograph are acres and acres of dried shrimp, with the winnowers, those logs that they used to roll over and crush the shrimp. You can also see the dried shrimp in the far hills, those white patches, that would be individual companies' drying areas. The buildings were board and batten—just put up there just to keep the weather out from whatever was inside.

Rat Rock Cove, from the opposite direction, probably taken at the same period as the previous picture, shows how they dried their nets, how they put them out, staggered them, large drying platforms and a couple of piers, with about forty 40-foot junks alongside. You can also see buildings in the top upper left-hand corner that are on China Camp Point—shows you the dimensions of the size of the community. This camp probably supported several hundred Chinese fishermen and their families.

This is the first photograph that I've ever seen of a woman here at China Camp. It was just donated to the park about five years ago. If you look closely, you can see ornate bracelets and earrings, a smock covering her everyday dress, and the hat. Even the hat is significant, in that this straw hat was the lowest of the peasants here in China. So somebody in China would be identified by not only their stature and their place of living, but by their dress.

This is a photograph of a fisherman in Rat Rock Cove taken at the same time as the previous photo. If you look behind him, you can see Rat Rock and then a junk and then some of the piers that were stationed in Rat Rock. You can also tell by his hat and his dress that he's

blending between traditional Chinese dress, and if you look at his boots, they're basically the same boots that would be worn in downtown San Francisco. So they had the ability to adapt to other apparel.

This photograph here shows two of the fishermen on a junk, probably taken by Charles H. Townsend. I don't think at the period of time that the Chinese fishermen were really too pleased to have these individuals taking their photographs. There was nothing in it as far as superstition or religion goes. It was just, I think, they recognized early on that it wasn't going to be a good thing with these men poking around in their business. Various laws like the Exclusion Acts of the 80s culminating with the Geary Act of 1892 were put in place to prohibit the Chinese from entering California, for various reasons.

Scientists of the day, the California and Federal Fish Commission people, were hired to analyze the industry and to use whatever material they found or gathered, whether it was scientific or just opinion, to look at the industry and ultimately to close it down. Using what I would consider junk science, they changed a fishing season that was done yearly by a lunar calendar, or fishing calendar, on a cyclic nature. It would have had a sustainable yield all year round. The first blow to the Chinese here was when they closed the fishery down in the most productive months. The next blow came when they closed export of shrimp completely. That was the final and most telling blow to the fishery of the 1800s.

This photograph shows, starting from the lower right corner, Frank's grandfather, Quan Yic Yin, his grandmother, seated beside him, Yee See, Henry Quan above Quan Yic Yin, and his brother George—probably taken in the 1905-1910 period. This photograph shows Grace Quan, Frank's mother, behind the store counter in the mid to late 40s, when shrimp sold for 25 cents a pound, peeled. You can see here, she's scooping out some to put in the bag for sale.

Photograph here shows the volume of traffic that they would have here in the 30s and 40s and early 50s. The amount of fishermen that would come here on weekends and holidays to rent boats would completely crowd out the parking lot. You can see where the store is today, on a weekend is identical to where it was back then, in those days. This is one of the prettier photographs taken from the air at about the same time, somewhere in the 40s. It shows the hills above China Camp, and China Camp as basically a sports fishing location for the people in the Bay Area to come to. It shows you the number of buildings; the length of the pier hasn't changed. The sorting shed was still there. And all these rowboats that were for rent during that period of time when fishermen would come over here and rent a boat and go out all day long and try their luck.

It's not unusual to have elderly people who grew up in the Bay Area, who as teenagers met out here, or in the twenties the fishermen who fished the shores of San Pablo Bay, who met Frank's father, who now know Frank at his father's age. It's a unique blend of the past and the present. And hopefully foretells the future—how the past prejudices are now dissolving and just becoming the past. Thank you.

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