

China Beach fishing village taken in the 1880s, possibly by Susan Augusta Lewis, whose mother operated the Hotel Capitola just around the bluffs. More than two dozen Chinese fishermen lived there.

Return to China Beach

By Geoffrey Dunn

During the first week of January in 1933, just east of the bluffs overlooking Capitola, a rum-running operation bringing bottles of bootleg alcohol into Santa Cruz County was apprehended by state and federal agents trying to curb the illegal importation of liquor during the waning days of Prohibition. One of the rum runners was discovered unconscious near the mouth of Porter Gulch. The following day, banner headlines in the Santa Cruz News trumpeted the story: "Rum Runner Seized Near Capitola At China Beach."

Painting: Geoffrey Dunn Collection

Twenty years later, the famed journalist and local historian Ernest Otto noted in his historical column in the Santa Cruz Sentinel that "China Beach" was located "at the upper end of the long stretch of beach reaching from Aptos to the dividing line between Capitola beach. This is now a state park adjoining the New Brighton section."



Rare impressionistic painting of China Beach by the famed California painter, A.D. M. Cooper, circa 1915. The title "China Beach" is written in Cooper's hand on the stretcher bar.

The small swath of shoreline on the western swing of New Brighton State Beach was once a thriving Chinese fishing village. Local historians believe it should be returned to its original name...

China Beach? Where did it go?

Clearly two 20th Century newspaper stories referenced the site by the name for which it had been known for at least 70 years. Then suddenly the name was abandoned, largely because state authorities wanted to erase any record of Chinese history from our regional nomenclature. The state park would become known as "New Brighton" — and China Beach would become a forgotten watermark on the pages of local history.

While many Californians understand that the Chinese played a role in building the state's railroads in the 19th Century, few understand how extensive a role Chinese immigrants played in a variety of economic sectors, particularly in agriculture and mercantile trade. It was also the Chinese who largely developed California's commercial fishing industry.

As historian Sandy Lydon noted in his



Italian fishermen setting nets at China Beach, circa early 1900s.



landmark work, *Chinese Gold*: The Chinese in the Monterey Bay Region, Chinese fishermen first entered the industry by harvesting abalone in the 1850s, then gradually expanded to other fisheries once the railroad opened up markets in the San Francisco Bay Area and inland valleys. In Santa Cruz County, the range of Chinese fishing villages extended from the North Coast all the way south to the Pajaro River.

After Chinese fishermen were driven out of Monterey Bay, Yankee and Italian fishermen took over the China Beach fishing grounds.

The roots of the Chinese fishing village just east of Capitola likely date back to the mid-1850s. In 1877, a local newspaper item indicated that the Chinese fishermen had been robbed by “travelling Chinamen” visit-

ing the village. The following year, according to records in the F. A. Hihn Archive at the University of California, one of the Chinese fishermen named Wang Lee negotiated a one-year lease with Hihn for fishing rights from the beach, for the sum of \$40 per annum.

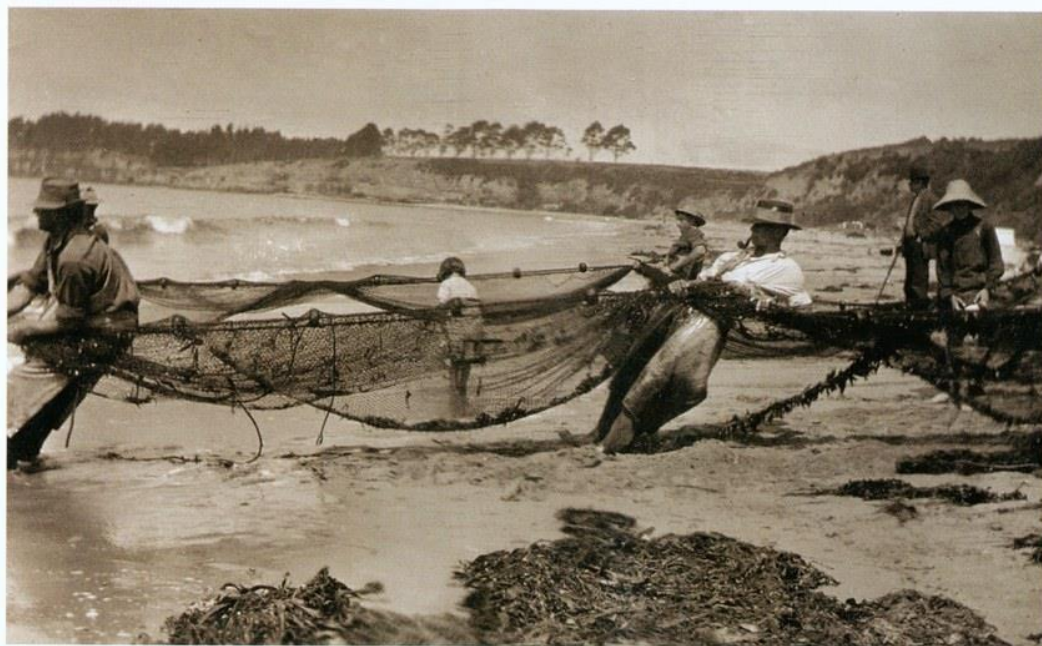
The Chinese constructed a picturesque and ramshackle structure composed of driftwood, scrap lumber and redwood shingles, set at the base of the cliff. Firewood was seemingly tucked away in every corner of the village. The United States Census of 1880 indicates that 29 fishermen were living there at the beginning of the decade, ranging in age from 16 to 48.

Fishing primarily with small gill nets and baited lines set from flat-bottomed sampans, the Chinese caught pompano — a rare and treasured delicacy — and a variety of other fish (including flounder, halibut, shark, rock cod and sea bass) for commercial sale.

By 1878, according to Lydon, “over half of the fish caught in Santa Cruz County were caught by the Chinese near Capitola.” In 1879, the Chinese harvested 177,000 pounds of fish that were placed aboard local trains for shipment to outside markets.

For all their success, however, the Chinese were not destined to last long in the Monterey Bay fishing industry. By the late

Photo: Gordon van Zuiden Collection



Seine nets were set by boat and then hauled in from the beach.

1870s, Italian fishermen from both Liguria and Sicily had begun playing local waters and a virulent anti-Chinese movement in Santa Cruz County forced the Chinese further toward the margins of the region's economy. The burgeoning tourist industry in the region also pushed the Chinese to the periphery. By the late 1880s, the fishermen from China Beach were pushed further east toward Aptos and eventually all the way to the Pajaro River. By the early 1890s, the Chinese had been driven from the local fishery entirely.

Even though Yankee and Italian fishermen took over the local fishing leases by the 1890s, the name China Beach had taken hold. And that's how the site was referenced for the next 40 years, when in 1934 the California park system commandeered the name of a nearby campground for the newly dedicated state beach.

As Munson Kwok, grand president of the Chinese-American Citizen's Alliance, wrote in a letter to the state in December of 2005: "Easy eradication of Chinese recognition or presence was typical of a period of intense anti-Chinese discrimination that persisted well into the first part of the 20th Century."

The following year, local historians, led by Lydon and Carolyn Swift, director of the



Capitola Museum, began an effort to have the site restored to its longstanding name. "It is not surprising that the state of California chose the name of a European resort over one commemorating a community of Asians that the public had worked so diligently to exclude from every facet of California's public life," they argued. "We believe that the historical evidence for restoring the name 'China Beach' to its rightful location is overwhelming." ■

(Above) Looking east along China Beach in the early 1900s. (Note the windmill on the beach).

Take a Closer Look

A permanent exhibit on the Chinese fishing colony at China Beach is located in the Pacific Migrations Visitor Center, New Brighton State Beach, and is open Memorial Day to Labor Day, Wednesdays through Sundays. Call 831-685-6444 for more information.