

## THE HISTORY OF PEACOCK GAP

The second of a three-part series

*Editors Note: This article was written with the help of Mrs. L. P. McNear.*

In a series of transactions between 1855 and 1869, the present 2,000-acre Peacock Gap property was divided into parcels and held by various owners. Among the owners were the brothers Joseph, James and Richard Bullis, and another mysterious owner with the intriguing name of Grenade King.

It was also during this period that the character of the area made another abrupt change — all because of Chinese labor being imported to construct the transcontinental railroad. Those who were smuggled in from Canton were often landed at night at San Pedro Point on what is now Peacock Gap property. A small group of Chinese had been making bricks nearby since 1855. The area became known as China Camp — and, of course is still called that today.

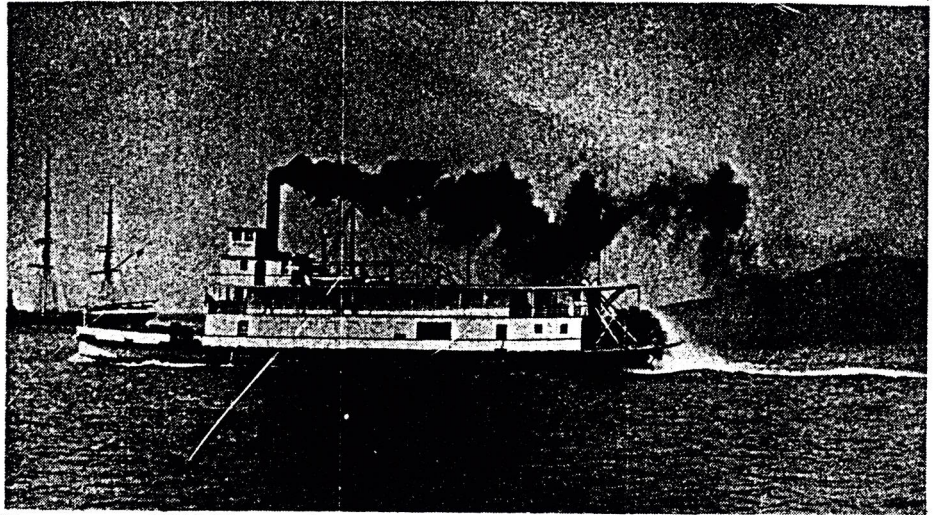
In 1870, the Chinese discovered a delicacy — the tiny Bay Shrimp and the mile square shrimp bed off China Camp. Experienced fishermen came from China to capture the market, but a big population explosion in China Camp came with the depression of 1877 and the Chinese Exclusion Act. Thousands of unemployed Chinese fled there from persecution in San Francisco. By the mid-1880's, China Camp's population was estimated at more than 10,000.

As it had been for the Miwoks, Peacock Gap was a haven for the Chinese. The hill-sides were terraced with gardens of string beans, angled luffia and Chinese cabbage. The waters of the Bay provided the residents with an excellent livelihood. The Chinese enjoyed the customs of their native land — dragon boats races on the fifth day of the fifth month, oriental rituals, a Joss House, junks for fishing boats.

However, in 1910, San Pablo Bay was seeded with Sea Bass. The Chinese fishing methods were incompatible with modern game conservation and the shrimpers gradually were forced to find other means of livelihood. China Camp was deserted.

Around the time the first Chinese started making bricks at Peacock Gap, a New England shipmaster, John McNear, discovered the charm of the area. He and his brother, George, started a steam launch firm that served Petaluma, San Pedro Point and San Francisco. The steamer "Gold" made one-round trip daily and was the only transportation between San Francisco and China Camp.

Also at this time, the name Peacock Gap came into use. The most obvious origin is traced to the Thomas A. Peacock family who leased one of the ranches in the area in 1888 for five years. However, there are Marin pioneers who claim the name came from peacocks kept at McNear's beach property. Still another theory is that the name came from the Chinese and their use of the peacock feather as a symbol of the Celestial Empire.



*The steamer "GOLD" passing McNear's Beach (the present Peacock Gap Beach and Yacht Club) as it plied its way from San Francisco to Petaluma.*

Around the turn of the century, McNear and his son, Erskine, took over the old Chinese brickyard on Point San Pedro Road which the family still operates. Some 80,000 bricks were made daily from Marin earth. John McNear's dream was to construct a railroad connecting the brickyard with San Rafael, a way-point on the San Francisco and North Pacific Coast Railroad. Gradually he bought the small ranches on the route and began building the road bed. By 1890 the road bed was completed, the lowlands filled to bring the railroad above ground level and the cut into the land was made — the cut that is known today as Peacock Gap.

John McNear's dream for San Pedro Point expanded even beyond that of the construction of the railroad. He envisioned this railroad connecting with a major deep-water sea port at Point San Pedro. He planned for the railroad to transport the wealth of lumber, grain, wines and fruits from Northern California to ships waiting to carry the cargo to all the ports of the world. McNear terraced the rolling hills behind China Camp to ready for construction of homes — this was to become one of the most important cities in the entire Bay area.

The catastrophic earthquake and fire of 1906 brought to a halt the entire project and ended the dream. John McNear's financial backers were forced to withdraw their support because of the bigger job, the rehabilitation of San Francisco.

While San Francisco burned, China Camp too, suffered many fires. Most of the homes in all three camps were completely destroyed. The Chinese found they were needed to help rebuild San Francisco, and gradually they began drifting away from China Camp. The animosity against them had faded away now and they were well-received by the people of San Francisco.

The only Chinese who remained was Quan Hock Quock. Since 1894, he had operated a small general merchandise store, catering to the workers at the nearby McNear Rock Quarry and "Starvation Gulch," the area adjacent to the quarry. Gambling provided

additional income, but the shrewd Quan was not content. A fortune in shrimp lay offshore. After experimenting with different types of fish nets for several years, he learned in 1924 that Frank Spenger, the pioneer fisherman of the East Bay, had devised a cone-shaped net about 75 feet long with a forty-foot mouth that could be dragged along the shallow floor of the bay. After using the net, Quan discovered that the shrimp would fall obediently into its folds and sport fish would swim free. He established the Yick Yuen Company, selling small bay shrimp to local markets, drying larger crustaceans for the Orient.

Quan's business name, Yick Yuen, held great significance. He realized that shrimp formed the most important and practically the sole food of salmon, sturgeon and other commercially valuable fish; its meat was rich in essential iodine and vitamins; its hulls were utilized in China as a valuable fertilizer; and its harvesting would create additional employment and profits to himself. Thus, the mile-square bed from which his company was supplied was christened "the garden for mutual benefit" or Yick Yuen.

At the peak of the shrimping industry in the 1920's, thirty-six motor boats, which had replaced the ancestral junks, each hauled in 1,000 pounds of shrimp a day. Trucks of the Diamond Shrimp Company came daily from San Francisco to pick up the load. By 1954, however, the harvest had dwindled until there was nothing. Mud had covered the beds.

Quan Hock Quock's son, Henry and his wife Grace, ran the remaining shrimping business at China Camp up until the disappearance of the shrimp in 1957. It is thought that pollution by chemically treated sewage was responsible for this disappearance of shrimp. Grace Quan, along with some of her children, still lives a China Camp operating a small snack bar and boat rental for fisherman who fish in bay waters for bass.

Frank Quan, her son, writes "The Fishing Line" which appears in *The Peacock*.

