FISHING METHODS

Chinese fished both the bay and the rivers for salmon and sturgeon and market fish. The methods used were sweep-seining (hostility of the white fishermen prevented the Chinese from using drift net and fyke nets) in the bays, and hook and line fishing outside the bays in the kelp beds and along the rocky parts of the coast.

Each of the fisheries employed practices and equipment peculiar to its kind. Some fisheries required small sampans for gathering operations while others required large junks to transport their catch. Shoreside facilities were also characterized by the particular enterprise.

By diligent and methodical work the year round, the Chinese made up for the restrictions placed upon them. Their fine mesh nets caught vast quantities of fish.

Chinese fishing camps were located on the ocean shore, around the bays, and along the Sacramento River. A visitor to one such camp on the Sacramento River near Rio Nita in 1873 observed:

"It . . . consisted of a nest of Chinese fishing boats numbering seven small boats and three large ones . . . The small boats were little, flat-bottomed dories, square at the stern, sharp at the bow, about 15 feet long and strongly built.

"The large boats were also strongly built, but narrow and pointed at both ends, and constructed in the Chinese fashion. Two of the three large boats had one mast, and the other one had two masts . . . with Chinese sails.

"The whole air and look of these crafts was decidedly foreign, and I might say oriental . . .

". . . The small boats are to visit the sloughs and various fishing points . . . and the larger boats are really only movable dwellings and storehouses, where they live and receive the fish that are brought in by the small boats . . .".

The pressure of the white fisherman’s union limited the Chinese to a minor part in the market fishing in San Francisco Bay. They were also pretty well excluded from the salmon industry, and in 1880 there were only 25 Chinese out of a total of 500 salmon fishermen working in Contra Costa and Marin Counties. However, they caught quantities of sturgeon. During this same period, Chinese fishermen on the Monterey peninsula annually caught great quantities of squids, rockfish, rock cod, halibut, flounder, red fish, blue fish, yellow tail, mackerel, sardines and shell fish, most of which were salted and dried for export to San Francisco where they found their way to Chinese communities all over the state or abroad. Even today the “ta-ti” (dai-di), a salted dried flounder
produced at Seaside near Monterey is a very popular item in Chinese communities.]

DECLINE
The success of the Foreign Miner's Tax led to an attempt to tax other occupations in which the Chinese predominated. In 1860 a tax of $4 per month was bid on all Chinese engaged in fishing to be enforced by the seizure of fish boat or other property. The revenue from this source was so disappointing that the act was repealed in 1864. In the mid-1870's pressure by Italian, Greek and Dalmatian fishermen, a law was passed regulating the size of the mesh in shrimp and drag nets. And in the 1880's the legislature passed a law requiring fishermen to take out a license at $2.50 per month. However, by this time the number of Chinese in the industry was rapidly declining. [Today, the fishing industry is dominated by the Italians.]

THE SHRIMP INDUSTRY
HISTORY OF THE INDUSTRY
The shrimp industry in California was one dominated by Chinese during most of the period it flourished. In 1871 Chinese fishermen were already reported using bag nets imported from China and taking great quantities of shrimps from San Francisco and Tomales Bays. And by 1880, California led among the eight shrimp-producing states.

For most of the life of this industry, San Francisco Bay was the center of activity, the Tomales Bay camps having been abandoned by the 1890's. The industry gave employment to many Chinese. One source stated that several hundreds were engaged in shrimp fishing on San Francisco Bay in 1874-1875.

The number of shrimp camps on San Francisco Bay for those years follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>No.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1897</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Vestiges of one at China Camp, Marin County.

Some of these camps bought the catch outright from independent fishermen for processing; in others the camp, fishing and shore equipment were owned by companies who then hired fishermen to work for them. There were also owner-companies which would lease the camp, vessel and equipment to others to operate. Each camp or individual fisherman had fishing rights to certain areas in the shrimp beds which were mutually recognized and respected.

DESCRIPTION OF SHRIMPERS
A report in July 1897 gave the following description of the Chinese shrimpers:

"The ... boat is of Chinese make and pattern and is 40 feet long by 10 feet on the beam, it carries a 30-foot mast, which bears a typical Chinese sail. The crew is invariably made up of five men. The fishing is done by means of bag nets made in China .... Each net is about 20 feet across its mouth, and narrows quickly into a narrow bag about 40 feet long ...."
CHINESE SHRIMP CAMPS ON SAN FRANCISCO BAY
1889-1930

NOTE
Shrimp camp locations are shown for the season of 1888-89 unless otherwise noted. Dates in parentheses refer to a subsequent ownership.

SOURCES
Paul Bonnot, The California Shrimp Industry, Fish Bulletin No. 38 (Sacramento: Division of Fish and Game of California, 1932).

Prepared expressly for the Chinese Historical Society of America Syllabus by member Robert A. Nash, Sierra Madre, Calif.
they are spread out on the ground to dry...". It took 15 pounds of fresh shrimps to make one pound of dried meat. The wholesale price in 1882 for fresh shrimp was 3 cents per pound, and 5 to 8 cents per pound for dried shrimp meat.

Since the quantity of shrimp taken was far in excess of the local demand for fresh shrimp, the major part of the catch was exported in dry form. In 1880 the amount exported to China, Japan and the Hawaiian Islands was estimated to be not less than $100,000 in value, consisting of approximately 1,000,000 pounds in meats and shells.

**Curtailment By State**

The efficient fishing methods used by the Chinese shrimpers brought charges that the Chinese fishing methods were destroying young smelts. Efforts were made to curtail the activities of the shrimp industry. In 1901 legislation was enacted making May, June, July, and August of each year a closed season for taking shrimps. The frankly expressed hope was that the interrupted season would force the shrimp camps to close and the experienced crews to leave for other employment, so that when the season reopened, there would be difficulty in getting trained hands.

Subsequently in 1905 legislation was passed prohibiting the exportation of dried shrimps and shrimp shells out of the state.

Actually, all these restrictions did not kill the shrimp industry in San Francisco Bay, for there were still 14 shrimp camps lingering in 1930. [It remained for industrial pollution of the Bay during and after World War II to give the industry its coup de grâce.]

**The Abalone Industry**

**Extent of the Industry**

Chinese early discovered the presence of abalone on the Pacific Coast, for in 1856 John Cooper wrote to Thomas Larkin that he saw a group of Chinese getting "aulones" (abalones). By the 1870's Chinese abalone junks were a familiar sight in San Diego. One authority observed in the 1880's that in San Diego County "most of the abalones are collected by Chinamen who have already stripped the coast as far south as Cerros Island. There are eight companies of them now between there and San Diego, four of these companies belong at San Diego and combine this labor with 'red fishing'...".

In Los Angeles County the Chinese fished the Channel Islands and controlled one-third of this trade. In Santa Barbara County a schooner took Chinese fishermen to the various islands, receiving the abalone shells to pay for the transportation, while the Chinese retained the flesh for their own profit. Other small abalone-collecting colonies were located in Santa Barbara County (Point Conception and Point Arguello), San Luis Obispo County (San Simeon, Cayucos and Port Hartford), Monterey County.

**Early Techniques**

Abalones were generally obtained by prying the shell fish with a trowel or spade from the rock to which they attached themselves. Although abalone meat had long been prized as a food in various part of the world, Americans in the 19th century had not yet learned to appreciate this delicacy. However, starting in 1860, the shell of this mollusc began to be prized here for ornaments and jewelry. By 1866 demand for abalone shells had so increased that over $14,000 worth was exported from San Francisco that year, while in 1867 the export was not less than $36,000. The shells were shipped to China, Europe or our Eastern States. In China they were broken up and used to inlay lacquer work.
The meat of the abalone was salted and dried, with the larger portion of every season’s crop shipped to China. In 1879, the abalone harvest in California was valued as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>Meat</th>
<th>Shells</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>San Diego</td>
<td>$14,000</td>
<td>$30,000</td>
<td>$44,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Francisco</td>
<td>9,500</td>
<td>23,750</td>
<td>33,250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Los Angeles</td>
<td>8,000</td>
<td>18,000</td>
<td>26,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santa Barbara</td>
<td>5,000</td>
<td>12,500</td>
<td>17,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ventura</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>2,500</td>
<td>3,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monterey</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>1,500</td>
<td>2,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Luis Obispo</td>
<td>780</td>
<td>575</td>
<td>1,355</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

JUNKS USED

The junks used in the abalone fisheries were of Chinese design and were built in the California camps. These were seaworthy vessels, a typical one being 54 feet long, with a beam of 12 feet and a hold depth of four feet. The government considered these junks to be alien vessels because of their Chinese ownership. After the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1892 was passed the Chinese suddenly found that they were forbidden to own junks operating in “foreign waters.” Consequently, many left for other employment and their place in the industry was gradually taken over by the Japanese. In 1901 a law was passed in the state legislature forbidding the taking of certain species of abalones measuring less than 15 inches around the outer edge. Subsequent legislation was even more restrictive, finally practically forcing the Chinese out of the industry.

OTHER FISHING ACTIVITIES

SHARK FISHING

In the waters off Santa Catalina in the 1880’s, and for 20 years previous, Chinese fishermen caught shark for eating, for its fin—a great Chinese delicacy, and for its liver which yielded a lubricating oil. This was one area where there was no other competition.

CRAB FISHING

In the 19th century, the Pacific Coast crab fisheries was not as highly developed as it is today. San Francisco was the chief market consuming approximately $75,000 worth per year, paying 75 cents per dozen for the crabs. The city wharves were used to a great extent by the Chinese who caught crabs for market by use of traps consisting of a strong circular net fastened to a 3-foot-diameter hoop, the bait being fastened inside. The crabs fastened themselves on the bait and made no attempt to escape even when the net was lifted from the water.

SEAWEED HARVESTING

Chinese in the Monterey fishing colony used to gather huge amounts of seaweed off the rocky shores of the Monterey Peninsula. The weed was dried in the sun and shipped to San Francisco to be used as food and as a source for agar-agar. Even today there is still some harvesting of seaweed by Chinese along the California coast.

THE SALMON CANNING INDUSTRY

CHINESE CANNERY WORKERS

In 1871, R. D. Hume became the first salmon canner owner to use Chinese labor, when the Chinese were introduced into his plant on the Rogue River. They were brought into the Columbia River canneries in 1872. Soon Chinese cannery workers were used almost exclusively in salmon canneries in Washington, Oregon, British Columbia and Alaska. However, they were excluded from participation in the salmon fishing industry.

It was only after the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act, that Chinese workers began to decrease, their places being replaced by the Japanese...
and later Filipinos. However, Chinese were still being employed in the “Yü-Sop’s (local Cantonese term for salmon cannery work) into the 1930’s.

Following is a tabulation of Chinese salmon cannery workers during various years:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1881</td>
<td>3,100</td>
<td>3,950</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1907</td>
<td>2,217</td>
<td>6,809</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1913</td>
<td>2,050</td>
<td>10,891</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1919</td>
<td>2,770</td>
<td>16,390</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1925</td>
<td>1,242</td>
<td>14,239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>662</td>
<td>11,081</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1934</td>
<td>872</td>
<td>13,716</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CANNERY WORK

One of the reasons that the Chinese were able to survive so long in the salmon canning industry was because the work was highly seasonal and hours were long. Thus it was not attractive to most other workers and Chinese workmen became the mainstay of the industry.

The work of the salmon cannery worker was not easy. As an example, at the Columbia River canneries in the 1880’s the season ran from April to August. The fish cutters and Chinese foremen received $40 to $45 per month, but most of the workers received $1 for a day of eleven hours and work as wanted, i.e., leaving when told and coming at any hour set.6

A description by an observer in the 1870’s gives an idea of the work:

“The salmon, when taken to the cannery, are placed on a long table, where the head, tail and fins are cut off, and the entrails removed by a few flashing strokes of a large knife, in the hands of an expert Chinaman, the average time for each of these large fish being less than half a minute. They pass to a tank of fresh water, where other men take off the scales; in a tank of salt water where they are thoroughly washed. A gang knife, with 6 blades, at one stroke divides the meat into pieces just long enough to fill a can. These sections are cut lengthwise into strips of suitable size, ready for the cans, which are filled by hand or by machine. The top of the can is put on and soldered by hand or by machine. The can is now put into a crate and lowered until the tops of the cans are half an inch under the surface [of a pan of boiling water] . . .” The remainder of the cooking and testing process was all done by Chinese.7

THE CONTRACT SYSTEM

Chinese labor was supplied by Chinese contractors, these being firms based in San Francisco, Seattle, Portland or Vancouver.9 Under this system, the contractor makes an agreement with the cannning company at certain fixed sums per case, to do all the work from the time the fish is delivered at the wharf until they are ready to ship at the end of the season, while the owner guarantees to pack a certain number of cases.10

While the contract system was favored by many cannery owners, it grew to be one of the most unpopular features of the industry from the worker’s standpoint, particularly after other workers than Chinese also entered into cannery employment. Poor quality of food, exorbitant prices for goods, inadequate and unsanitary quarters were some of the abuses.10 Finally in the mid-1930’s unionizing of the cannery workers rang down the curtain on this feature of the industry.11

CALIFORNIA CANNERIES

Although the salmon canning industry in California did not compare in production to that of the Pacific Northwest, it was flourishing on the Sacramento River. In the late 1870’s there were eight canneries in operation employing 800 men. Out of this number, all of the can-makers were white; the remainder Chinese,12 who probably did the same work as in the Columbia River canneries.

5 Compiled from data given in U. S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of Fisheries, Alaska Fishery and Fur Seal Industries (appendices to the Annual Report of the Commissioner of Fisheries for the given year).