Shoot out at New Brighton Beach

While New Brighton and Seacliff State Beaches are favorites today for locals and visitors alike, there is some history here that isn’t widely known, from Chinese fishermen to a shootout on the bluff.

Chinese laborers played a major role in California’s early history from the 1850s into the 1880s, working in the gold mines in the Sierras, building the railroads and digging the tunnels that carried early trains through the Santa Cruz Mountains. When the California Gold Rush lost steam these immigrants began to look for other opportunities. One of these was fishing in Monterey Bay.

Beginning in the 1850s and continuing into the 1880s, several generations of Chinese settled in a small village built mostly of scrap lumber and driftwood at the base of the bluffs of what today is New Brighton State Beach. It was known for many years as China Beach and is described as having 29 Chinese fishermen (no women) by the 1870s. The fishermen set their nets from small boats in the corner of the bay where fish tended to congregate. They could then be seen walking along local streets carrying baskets of fish hung on bamboo poles carried across their shoulders to sell. They also split, dried and preserved fish with salt for shipment to more distant markets.

The local Chinese population provided local tables with fish and vegetables, manned the laundries, and staffed local homes as chefs and houseboys. By the 1870s, however, fishermen of other ethnicities, primarily Italians and Portuguese at that time, began to settle in the area, gradually forcing out many of the Chinese residents. The expanding resort industry and a growing wave of anti-Chinese sentiment, culminating in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, contributed to the demise of the settlement at China Beach and forced the last of the Chinese fishermen out of Santa Cruz County. By 1900, there was no evidence that the small driftwood village ever existed.

The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was the first immigration legislation in the United States directed towards excluding members of one particular race from entering the country. The Act only excluded Chinese laborers for ten years, leading Congressman Thomas Geary of California to write what became known as the Geary Act in 1892. This legislation renewed the exclusion of Chinese laborers for another ten years and also required certificates of residence and identity, like internal passports. Failure to carry these documents led to a risk of deportation, or a year of hard labor followed by deportation. Needless to say, this was a very different time and difficult time and neither the United States’ nor California’s finest hour.

Several decades later there was a bizarre incident a short distance down the shoreline from the former Chinese fishermen’s settlement at what today is Seacliff State Beach. Paul Woodside, who was described as a demented hermit, had built a shack on the lower bluff. He had refused to sell his small property to make way for a new road along the base of the bluff, presumably Pot Belly Beach or Las Olas Drive today. He had also threatened to dynamite any motorist who
drove along the existing road below his cabin. Woodside claimed that he owned the land as far as his gun could shoot and that Captain Kidd’s treasure was buried on his land.

On September 5, 1925, Watsonville Sheriff Howard Trafton and Undersheriff Richard Rountree had the job of going out to take the hermit into custody because of his threats. The plan was to have him committed to an institution. But what might have seemed at the time like a relatively easy job for a sheriff and his undersheriff turned into total mayhem on the bluff.

When Trafton and Rountree entered Woodside’s cabin, they saw him sitting in a chair with a pistol in one hand and a sawed-off shotgun lying across his lap… the first sign that perhaps this wasn’t going to be so easy after all. They initially tried to talk calmly to the demented man so as not to get him riled up because he was known to be quite temperamental. While Rountree held Woodside’s attention, Sheriff Trafton tried to subdue him. This is when things went south quickly.

Rountree reportedly pounded on the man’s head with a hatchet while Trafton was beating him with the butt of his gun. Woodside’s guns had now been knocked to the floor and the sheriff managed to get one handcuff on him. In the process, however, Woodside got the sheriff’s pistol and shot once at Trafton, hitting him just above his heart. He then turned and shot Rountree three times in the abdomen. Rountree then managed to pull out his own gun and emptied it into Woodside. Trafton was finally able to wrestle his gun back and shoot Woodside in the head.

Rountree staggered out to the porch of the shack where he collapsed and died. Sheriff Trafton somehow managed to crawl up the steep cliff to his car, where workmen who had heard the gunshots found him. He was taken to Santa Cruz where he died several hours later. Woodside, who must have been one tough cookie, managed to survive until 2:30 that afternoon, despite the multiple bullet wounds. Just before he died he was attempting to pull something out of his pocket – a stick of dynamite with a short fuse.