

## **Three Old Kings of Anacapa Island** **H. Bay Webster, Raymond LaDreau (Frenchy), Charlie Johnson (Swede)**

**By Merrill Carr Allyn**

One of the few places where a person can land safely on the north side of Middle Anacapa Island is in a narrow kelp choked inlet that terminates in a little sea cave. Sloping rock on the east side of this rocky slot provides a footing when you scramble out of your dinghy and if the boat is small enough, a place to pull it ashore out of the reach of the sea. While you are doing this you may happen to notice a chunk of concrete by the waters edge and may wonder who poured it there and for what purpose.

The concrete was once the foundation for a wooden structure which cleverly bridged the narrow inlet and was used to support the tackle for lifting skiffs from the water. The structure was built sometime around 1914 while a rather remarkable man named H. Bay Webster held Middle and West Anacapa Islands by lease from the Lighthouse Service of the U.S. Government.

Climb the narrow paths worn in the rocky soil so many years ago and you will come to the foundations of two small buildings, a small cistern dug in the rock, a few rotted fence posts and some remnants of rusted wire. These things remain from the days when this was Captain Webster's island home.

Bay Webster's seafaring father took him to Anacapa when he was very young. Something about the lonely rugged island appealed to him and he kept going back there for some seventy years. He hunted seals there as a young man, turned to commercial fishing, leased the island from the government for grazing and ran a few sheep. When he married he established a home on the island. His two sons were born on the mainland but one at least was taken to the island when two weeks old.

When Bay lost the island lease to a higher bidder he sorrowfully moved his family back to the mainland. There he took part in a number of activities which through the years ranged all the way from the attempt to found a newspaper to the establishment, with the help of his sons, of the street bus system which still serves the Ventura-Ojai area.

Throughout his participation in these shoregoing activities, he retained ownership of a boat, kept up his passenger for hire license and took week-end visitors to the islands. His boats included the *Happy*, *Tempest*, *Virginia*, *Anacapa* and *Corliss*. The *Corliss*, the biggest and the last of them was a 45 foot schooner rigged gas boat with a huge 3 cylinder *Corliss* T-head engine.

Bay was familiar with all of the islands off Southern California and knew many of the fishermen who took their living from these waters but it was Anacapa and the

Anacapa fishermen that he liked the best. Whenever circumstances would permit he returned to Anacapa waters.

When Bay started boating nearly all the small vessels were propelled by sail. When gas engines became available he accepted them suspiciously as convenient nuisances, not entirely to be trusted. He still had his boats rigged for sail. He knew that sooner or later the sail could be depended on to get him safely home.

He preferred taking out sightseers and picnic parties and everything else being even he shied away from sportfishermen saying some of these were not sports at all but fish-hogs who wasted their catch. It made little difference to him what kind of tackle was used to make a catch. The important thing was the use that you found for your fish, lobster or abalone once you had them. He could find more respect for the "commercial who caught a tone of fish, took proper care of them and got them in the market in good condition than he could for a sport fisherman who caught fifty pounds and then let them rot. The sea's creatures were put there for man's use and not to be destroyed needlessly.

Bay was not one to set lobster traps out of season or to traffic in "shorts or bulls," the undersized and oversized lobsters. He would occasionally catch an out-of-season lobster with his hands. If a lobster was foolish enough to hide in a place in a sea-cave that was accessible to a row-boat and Bay quick enough to catch the stupid creature then it deserved its fate and found its way to the galley of the *Corliss* or to the camp kitchen where it furnished the flavoring of a kettle of Martha Webster's Ciuppina. Anyone who ever sat down to a bowl of this delicacy remembers its rich flavor, the chunks of delicate lobster meat and the little dumplings floating around the top.

Ciuppina (Chupeen) was sea-food at its best. It contained potatoes, onions, tomatoes, peppers, garlic and seasoning as well as the lobster meat and those tiny dumplings. Martha Webster's ciupina was a dish among dishes. It is to be hoped that someone took the opportunity to write down the recipe.

Bay was nobody's brawny two-fisted seafarer. Instead he was a rather small man who probably throughout his entire life looked much younger than he actually was. He was quite a modest person, temperate in word and deed, generous with others and quite frugal with himself. Very occasionally when the situation demanded it he would speak out with an authority that made itself known and obeyed.

He spoke Spanish well enough to make him accepted whenever native Californians got together and he acquired enough grasp of Chinese to be able to carry on a conversation with the inhabitants of the early day Chinese fish camps.

When he was at Anacapa his greatest enjoyment was getting into an old row-boat and, rowing slowly along the foot of the cliffs and exploring each little inlet, drift-wood beach and sea-cave. If he liked sailing better than motor boating, then he liked this leisurely rowing better than sailing. He was an inveterate beachcomber. There

was always something that he needed for boat or camp and when he was on these rowing expeditions he watched the sea and the driftwood coves for something which could be adapted to his need.

He had a great patience in hewing and carving drifted timber to fit his purpose.

He could tell you a great deal about what had happened around Anacapa. The Gold Rush ship *Winfield Scott*? Why yes, he remembered seeing it the first time he went to the island. He was present when the salvagers came from San Francisco in 1898 and blew it apart for the brass and copper. He could take you to a height where you could look down in the water and show you the still remaining outline of the hull on the bottom of the sea at the base of a cliff. He knew the story of the wreck of the *Scott* and when he told it he carefully labeled fact and possible fiction.

The thing that bothered him was his inability to learn who planted the eucalyptus trees on the middle island just above where he made his camp. They were there when he first went to the island, as big then as they ever succeeded in growing. He thought that they must have been one of the first plantings in California.

The Eucalyptus trees are there yet, their roots down to the bedrock, they continue to send up new sprouts, die back and sprout again. This is unchanged. Another thing unchanged is the tilted mesa, which forms the top of the Middle Island. It is covered sparsely with wild-oats, ice-plant, prickly pear and cholla cactus. There are some birds, a large population of rats, said to have come from the wreck of the *Scott* and a few house-cats gone wild, the descendants of fishermen's pets.

Wreck of *Scott* no longer seen-skin divers bring up copper from her.

Farther west there is a narrow beach on the north side of the juncture between the Middle and West Islands. Above this beach four board shacks used to cling to notches dug out of the steep hillside. They were the hone of other, far different sort of men, who in their own way loved the island and wanted to spend the balance of their lives there. Notable among these, in more recent times were Charley (Charles Johnson) and Frenchy (Raymond LeDreau).

The first inhabitants of the Fish Camp as this little community was called were probably the Chinese who camped there while drying abalone for shipment back to their old country. When this activity was outlawed, the Chinese left and after a time their place was taken by a succession of lobster fishermen who lived in the camp and tended their traps from skiffs.

They got there something like this. They went to the Santa Barbara lobster broker who staked them to trap materials and supplies and shipped them out to his various camps some time ahead of the opening of the lobster season. The broker then sent his boat around, picking up the catch for credit to the fisherman's account and taking orders for groceries and supplies which would be charged against the fisherman and delivered on the boat's next round.

Many of the fishermen who went out to live in these camps were past middle age and no longer employable ashore. Some of them went because they knew that they had an uncontrollable thirst or even an uncontrollable temper. Some were undoubtedly hiding from a criminal past. Some tried to hide from themselves and some terrible mistake of earlier life. Some, really the best of them, were the last of the old sailing-ship men, who had outlived their occupation.

A fisherman might stay out in one of those island camps a season, go ashore and settle up and next season be sent to another camp (the broker had over 20 camps scattered around Anacapa, Santa Cruz and Santa Rosa) or he might decide he liked a particular camp and settle himself there in defiance of the island owners, lessees, the broker or anyone else.

Frenchy, as I remember it, was sent to the Anacapa Fish Camp in 1928 by the S. Larco Fish Company of Santa Barbara. Chico Larco, head of the company then had some sort of working arrangement with the Santa Barbara man who held the island lease.

Frenchy was probably born in a province of France. He had the beginnings of a good education. It is probable that he was on the way to be a priest or at least a professional man of some sort. Then something happened-something so dark and dreadful that he was never able to tell even the most sympathetic listener just what it was.

He went to sea, was in the Spanish American War, became a resident of San Pedro California and drifted into commercial fishing. First he fished from the larger fishing boats and finally became a skiff fisherman working out of a lobster camp on the coast of Lower California.

There seems to be some question whether Frenchy was ever married. Some of his friends say that he told them that he once had a wife and a daughter. What became of them? When this question was asked poor Frenchy would become ensnarled in a struggle with his emotions and the complexities of the English language. The most of any hearer got out of it was the impression that the old man felt very deeply on the subject.

Frenchy's name may or may not have been le Dreau. Fisherman around the island called him Frenchy or sometimes Raymond. I once heard him asked if he didn't have any other name. He said that Raymond was good enough. He once had another name but it wouldn't mean anything if anyone heard it. The name he then gave was a long French one. He was right-it didn't mean anything to me and I long since forgot it.

The Websters who had great sympathy for the lonely men of the lobster camps, knew Frenchy quite well. They called him Mr. Raymond and thought that his life held some black chapter for which he was trying to atone. They said that he was a man who was being punished by his own thoughts.

Whatever Frenchy's background he made up his mind he was going to stay there at the Fish Camp and that was that. He fell into a routine, which, with the exception of one four year period was to last for the next twenty-five years. From September to the middle of March Frenchy tended his line of lobster traps, sending his catch ashore by the broker's pick up boat. When the season was over he would go ashore, collect the balance due him and start his rounds of the fishermen's bars.

His money never lasted long and he would soon be headed back to the island aboard the boat of some accommodating fisherman. He would arrive home broke, sick and with an inadequate stock of supplies drawn against his next season's catch. The next five or six months was a thin time for him.

Closed season or not Frenchy nearly always had a couple of traps out fishing lobsters for him. In place of the brightly painted redwood buoys used during the season, these would be marked with a bulb of giant kelp, a bottle or piece of driftwood, cleverly tied to appear that it had floated in on top of the kelp and lodged there.

The lobsters caught out of season were cached in sunken receivers hidden close to the camp where they could be easily reached if wanted to give a few "bugs" to a friend or to sell or trade for food or wine to certain other trusted visitors.

No one interfered with this activity for a long time. Then the demand became greater and Frenchy tried to expand his operation. He was apparently somewhat less careful in marking his traps and the Fish and Game discovered them during a routine visit to the island. The wardens went to Frenchy and told him that they had located a number of baited traps and pointedly asked if he had any idea whose they were.

"Nah, nah, nah!" Poor Frenchy denied.

"Well then" the warden said, "You won't mind if we pull them up and destroy them." The searched out and destroyed between 15 and 20 traps. Frenchy never again tried to operate on such a big scale.

In 1933, several things happened to affect Frenchy's occupation of the Fish Camp. The first was a change in the people who held the island lease. The Santa Barbaran who had the island posted "No Landing" signs on it and Bay Webster and several other Venturans got their heads together and decided to try to outbid him. In order to get those signs down and have a place where they-and all others who wished to do so might land, they contracted to lease the Middle and West Anacapa for five years.

Members of the Ventura group were not interested in the lobster catch at that time and agreed that the Santa Barbara lobster broker could continue to pick up the lobsters from the Anacapa Camps. The lessees were agreed that it would do no harm

and might even be an advantage if there were men living in the camp who could give a hand if anything ever happened to boaters around the island.

Twice in Bay Webster's experience he had received substantial help from the men of the camps. Once when he was worn out from fighting a storm and might have lost his boat and even his life, the Chinese had seen his plight and came to his rescue. Again, he had been stricken by sudden illness while at the island and had been cared for and then taken ashore by the Scandinavian who was then living at the fish camp. Frenchy might have stayed at the Fish Camp if he and his camp mate hadn't made a discovery.

Certain experiments put them on to a recipe for making a very potent brew out of dried fruit, sugar and a few other ingredients available through their regular lines of supply. This was brought forcefully to the attention of one of the lessees when one of them landed at the camp with a picnic party consisting of some presumably gently reared school teachers. Frenchy and his buddy were in just the right shape to welcome these people and help them ashore. They came prancing down to the beach to help, clad only in their somewhat soiled long handled underwear.

The shaken boatman called a meeting of the partnership when he got back to Ventura. In the discussion that followed several other interesting reports came to light. One man knew of some fighting that had been going on among the island fishermen and another had talked to a yacht owner who said that Frenchy had charged him for the landing privilege and an additional fee to use some of the islands drift for his campfire. The lease-holders decided about then that Frenchy had to go.

The lobster broker was notified that if he wanted to continue to get the Anacapa camps' catch he must find some fishermen who could better adjust themselves to the presence of picnickers and campers. The broker agreed. Frenchy would be moved to a Santa Cruz Island camp and two new men would be sent to Anacapa.

I had reason to stop at the Fish Camp the very day the new men arrived. I found that they were Fred (Kangaroo) Peterson and Charles (Charley) Johnson. Both were most definitely Scandinavians, both had been deep-water sailors. Kangaroo's name came from long time residence in Australia. Though it was to be some time before I found it out Charley who years before had sported mane the color of a red rock cod, known by other commercial fishermen as "Grouper-head."

They were polite though somewhat less than enthusiastic about getting too well acquainted. They had apparently been told to steer wide when they met any of the lessees and to avoid doing anything to upset anyone who came off of one of the three lessees' boats. Peterson tried to talk quietly but his voice just wouldn't let him. His least whisper came out as a big bass shout. He was a fine looking man who appeared to be in the best of health, but his camp-mate Johnson was very sick. He

had been ashore in San Diego for a long time and the sudden move to the “drier” climate of the island was almost too much for him.

I returned to the mainland quite disturbed and told the other lessees that it looked almost as though Larco had sent a dying man to the camp and that I thought the next boat to go to the island should stop at the camp to see how he was getting along. This was done and the boatman came back with the word that Johnson was much improved.

Peterson stayed at the North Fish Camp for one season then moved up to a camp on Santa Cruz. Johnson gradually thawed to the people of Ventura and some of the others who visited the island.

Observing that he was existing on a salt pork, salt fish and boiled potato diet I decided it might be a good idea to take him a small beef pot-roast and a few bunches of green vegetables when I next visited the camp.

When I arrived with this donation, he refused it at first. “What are you?” he wanted to know, “Are you some kind of religious?”

I tried to explain that fresh food was so cheap ashore and that I knew he couldn’t run to the store and get it. I just brought him some stuff because I thought he might enjoy it. And I most certainly wasn’t a member of any religious order.

“Well then, if that is so, I will accept if you will come and eat with me when this good food is cooked. I just wanted you to know that no kind of religious (he pronounced it ree-lee-gee-ous) is going to reform me. I am either 67 or 76, I forget which. I have been any places and done many things both good and bad, and it is much too late to try to change my ways.”

Quite slowly we became acquainted and finally reached the point where he would occasionally ask me to do an errand for him ashore like buying a kind of his favorite tobacco for him, or hunting up a can of powder that would keep his denture from falling out. Then, bit by bit I learned something of his past life.

Charley Johnson was born in Sweden and like so many of his countrymen had shipped out on a sailing vessel at an early age. He had worked up from boy to able seaman then to “bose” and then mate and then had slid back again. He worked ashore too wherever there was excitement and this meant Australia and Alaska. He had worked in the great west as a cow-hand and as the powder-man for a mine.

Like Frenchy, Charley Johnson claimed to have served in the Navy during the Spanish American War. Unlike Frenchy who only hinted of a dishonorable discharge, Charley boasted that he had been kicked out for talking back to an admiral (one of our better known heroes—Admiral Dewey).

Finally, Charley became a cable splicer for a West Coast shipyard and he stayed there for quite a few years. His drinking got the best of him and he lost his job. Then he turned to commercial fishing. He was high man of the Lower California lobster camps until advancing age slowed him down and the San Diego brokers decided he was too old to gamble their equipment with any longer. He mentioned how much harder it was getting for him to get around in a boat. "My legs are going but my hands are still very strong," he would say. And then again "I fancy Anacapa will be the last place I cast anchor."

Once, I asked him if he had ever been married. "No-o-o," he said slowly, "but I can tell you that there was once a fine red-headed school teacher in Cleveland. I fancy things might have been a lot different if I had not been a saloon-keeper at the time."

Charley got along pretty well with the people who landed for picnics or camping. If they wanted to talk to him, he'd talk, if not, then he could mind his own business. Occasionally he had a little innocent fun with them. There was the time that several youngsters of a prominent family of Swedish descent visited the island. They were told that there was a man who talked Swedish there and they lost no time in hunting him up and greeting him with what was probably the only Swedish they possessed. He answered them with a veritable volley and they looked at him blankly. "Answer me" he demanded. And then "Say something."

"Yah, sure" one of them said.

"Yah, sure, yah, sure" Charley mimicked. "Better I go and talk to the seals. They know more Swedish than you do."

And again, there was the lady writer who questioned Charley about the details of living on an island alone. She learned that his water supply came from rainwater which ran off the roof into a barrel and was slightly augmented by a little water laboriously collected from a small seep in a sea cave. "But where do you get the water when you want to take a bath?"

Lady, I don't take a bath unless I fall in and I haven't fallen in, in some time now."

Actually, he never failed to take a bath on his birthday-October 12, Columbus Day, Xmas and certain other occasions.

Charley was at the camp four years, fishing in the winter, making his trip ashore to settle up, going back to the island sick and broke, and then just getting by until the next lobster season.

A fisherman left him on the beach after his last trip ashore. Charley climbed the path to his island home, went in, closed the door, lay down on his bed and died—just as he had said he wanted to do.

About the time of Charley's death it was learned that the Government; owners of Anacapa, had decided against putting it up for lease again. Its status had changed and it was to be known as a Channel Islands Monument and be administered by the National Park Service.



During the four years of Charley's reign on Anacapa, Frenchy had been moved from camp to camp by the lobster broker. In one camp he ran afoul of the owners of Santa Cruz and told them in no uncertain manner what they were doing wrong in raising their livestock. At another camp, he got in a fist and rock fight with the other tenant and they nearly killed each other. Each time the broker moved him to a more isolated spot. At the time of Charley's death, Frenchy was exiled to Gull Island camp—by himself.

When a passing fish boat brought Frenchy the word of Charley's death and the changed status of the island, Frenchy recognized opportunity and hired the fisherman to take him bag and baggage to the Anacapa camp. He had apparently guessed right. The Park people were apparently not ready to take over yet and in fact, probably didn't know what they were going to do with the island they had acquired. So, they left Frenchy alone to lord it over the island, fish for lobsters, and trade them for his necessities.

At the start of WWII, the Navy tried to move Frenchy off the island for the duration. They tried. They took him ashore. When they returned for a check-up there he was back living in his cabin. They moved him again with a solemn warning. In a short time they checked again and he was back again, unable or unwilling to tell them just how he got there. There is one theory that he rowed a heavy skiff across the Channel at night to get home.

The Navy finally decided that he could stay and watch the island for them. They had recognized an unconquerable spirit or possibly had seen vision of an ample supply of lobsters for the officer's mess. At any rate, Frenchy stayed, the "Navy" looked in on him from time to time and by the war's end he had the shack which he used as a warehouse bulging with paint, cordage, cases of canned food and other "surplus."

After the war, friends helped Frenchy apply for a State old age pension and he stayed on at the island, the very picture of a senior citizen who had it made. He needed only fish as much as he wanted to. He could be generous in sharing his meager supply of water with visitors from the mainland or he could display his authority by denying the use of the driftwood he needed not at all. He could take people fishing in his big skiff and indulge in a bit of play-acting to impress them with his vast knowledge of the ways of the sea's creatures.

Though Charley never was one for pets he tamed several island cats during the four years he was on the island. These he always named Yiggs (Jiggs) no matter whether the cat in question as a Jiggs or a Maggie. Frenchy during his later occupation of the island had 13 pet cats. He would stab open a can of navy condensed milk and pour it in 13 pools on top of a big workbench. Then calling each by name herangue the cats about each keeping it to its own puddle of milk.

Finally the Welfare people brought up the matter of Frenchy's advanced age and the fact that his sight was failing and he had suffered several bad falls. When they told him that he could not stay of the island longer, he regretfully agreed to move to the mainland.

He gathered together the possession that he wanted to take with him and went about the sorrowful task of putting his 13 cats to death, telling "Baby Boo" "Fifi" and rest, that it was necessary so that they would not suffer hunger when he left them.

Frenchy was seen a few times after that on the mainland. He was reported visiting the Santa Barbara waterfront, he went to see an old friend in Hueneme. Then a rumor spread amongst the commercial fisherman that old Anacapa French was dead.

The rumor was probably right. Surely Frenchy would have passed away soon after they set him ashore. A man like that, why, civilization would have done for him quickly.

A lot more people visit Anacapa now. The Park people keep attendants over the island during the summertime. They have torn down and burned those snug cabins with their corners anchored against the worst north-easter. and live in a poorly moored tent that's apt to go adrift any time. They wear uniforms and go around picking up EMPTY beer cans. They have a rule against anyone picking up shells or pretty rocks and won't let you use the driftwood. About all that's left at the camp to remind one of Frenchy and Charley is a bit of old rusty iron chain cemented in the rock at the foot of a cliff. That's what they used to anchor the tackle they used to pull their heavy old wooden skiffs up on the steep rocky beach.

Looking at it one way their death was timely. It's a good thing those old kings didn't stick around to see their island go to pot. Captain Bay Webster wouldn't necessarily have liked things the way there are not, but he would probably have recognized the need for change to accommodate more visitors. Chances are the other two would neither have like nor understood any of it.