

POP GINGLE-

Hong Kong Host

A salty ex-gob from Wisconsin, stranded in strange territory 15 years ago, wound up running an international hangout (American style) that's famed all over the Far East

By BILL STAPLETON

Hong Kong

EDWARD FRANCIS GINGLE, Esq., ex-United States Navy chief steward, admits he's quite a distance from Junction City, Wisconsin, these days; but he takes a philosopher's long view of the fact.

Discharged after 30 years' service, Pop Gingle (everybody pronounces it "jingle") was paid off in Hong Kong Harbor aboard the destroyer tender USS Blackhawk in 1936. Tucked in his pocket as he went ashore was a 23-jewel platinum watch given to him by the crew of the ship and it's still his proudest possession.

The presentation of the watch immediately preceded a shore-based celebration of such caliber that old-time residents of Hong Kong began dating subsequent local events from that evening.

The morning after, ex-Chief Gingle woke up and made some rather startling discoveries, in addition to the realization that he had the grandfather of all hang-overs. First, he was still in Hong Kong. Second, he had lost a round-the-world ticket that was to get him back to Wisconsin. And third, he found a receipted bill of sale in one pocket that certified he was the new owner of the 60-room Palace Hotel in Kowloon.

Characteristically, Pop set out to "get the damn' hotel organized" and incidentally to begin a reputation that has spread the name of his bar and restaurant at 70 Nathan Road to the four corners of the world and earned him the fitting description of "a real Far East character."

If you stop any ricksha boy or taxi driver in this tropical community and shout no more than "Gingle's!" at him, he will shortly deposit you at the door of the international hangout, where the flavor of excellent American home cooking mixes with the spice of well-mellowed companionship among world travelers.

Pop gets a tremendous kick out of the idea that his name has become a byword in such places as Tokyo, Singapore, Calcutta, the Fiji's and even barren Shemya in the Aleutians.

Pilots, particularly, have him in high regard, since Pop has been known to stake many a "grounded" airman until things picked up again.

They tell you, "Listen, buddy, if you ever wind up out here and you're stuck for dough, a square meal or some transportation, don't let it panic you. Look up the old man."

The softball team off the United States Far Eastern Fleet's headquarters' ship, USS Eldorado, will be a long time forgetting their visit to Gingle's in 1946.

Not only did Pop rattle his 300 pounds around as official bat boy for the lads while they played teams from the Hong Kong garrison, but he gained near immortality when he produced cold beer for all hands at every game.

A famous picture of Pop in his bat boy uniform decorates the back bar and he's prouder of that

than he is of knowing the team's top boss, Vice-Admiral Oscar Badger.

"Knew him when he was a damn' ensign," he recalls.

Among other top brass that Pop remembers personally is Vice-Admiral M. E. Miles, a good friend and Gingle's commanding officer when he served on destroyer convoy duty during the first crossing of the A.E.F. to Europe in World War I. Gingle was a chief aboard the USS MacDougal.

His past service in the "cans" of the fleet is reflected today in the overwhelming receptions he lays on for destroyermen who make liberty in Hong Kong.

Pop's comfortable establishment in Kowloon is as American as a short-order drive-in on U.S. 1. The walls are undecorated, except for a picture of Custer's Last Stand, and a juke box in a corner of the room is loaded with the latest in Stateside hillbilly and swing records.

"Listen, boy," he rumbles from the depths of his massive frame, "I'm content to stay out here. Where else in this screwball world can I sit at a crossroads like this, meet all kinds of interesting people every day and get the chance to shoot the breeze with the kind of characters you see around this joint?"

"A lot of guys want to stick around the house or go sit on a porch somewhere when they get to my age, but I wouldn't trade this deal for anything back in the States."

Pop folded his latest copy of a naval reserve publication into a comfortable fly-swatting hold and yelled in Cantonese for another cold beer.

"I can talk to my mother once a month on the transpacific telephone and so I'm always in touch with home." (Mrs. Gingle is eighty-seven years old and lives in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin.)

Born on August 17, 1884, Pop reached for his first cold beer in Milwaukee when he was seventeen years old and joined the Coast Guard almost simultaneously. He transferred over to the Navy at the beginning of the first World War. After the war, he shipped out of San Francisco with the Pacific fleet.

His favorite enlistment covered the period of service on the upper Yangtze River in China on the American gunboat USS Helena.

"I was hanging around Canton the day in 1924 when the Nationalist forces drove back a bunch of Communists who'd burned half the city. In those days they were shooting wooden bullets at each other," Pop said, an old excitement alive in his eyes.

His original stake in the colony's business life, the Palace Hotel, was blasted flat by the United States Fourteenth Air Force when the Japanese occupied Hong Kong during World War II. The Japs had been using the hotel for a military headquarters and somebody tipped off the American bombers.

Pop was interned in Stanley Camp, the wartime prison for colony families which was set up by the Japs near Victoria not far from Hong Kong proper. During the three years and eight months he spent there, he saw some other interests go down the drain, too. Gingle's Dixie Kitchen and Gingle's Little Spot, both experiments in hamburger and coffee counters for a startled British colonial trade, were confiscated and later wrecked.

Pop's Chinese wife, Susie, put the show back on the road after they were released from internment and their present establishment, on one of Kowloon's busiest streets, is a tribute to her managing of business matters. Mabel, their young daughter, actually runs the place while Pop gathers with old cronies from Navy days.

His unabated saltiness occasionally riles a customer. For example, a British customer who had ordered a dozen oysters demanded the shells after he finished his meal. Not understanding what to him was an odd request, Pop simply shouted: "I suppose if you ordered a cup of coffee, you'd want the cup and saucer, too, huh?"

The Englishman explained he intended giving the shells to his chickens.

The Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, who had just returned to Hong Kong after nine months' service in Korea, mobbed the restaurant on their return. Pop broke out Australian T-bone steaks for all the soldiers who could crowd into the restaurant. Plus free cold beer, "until it ran outta their ears."

Pop regards the British Hong Kong garrison soldiers as his personal household troops. Most of them make his place a regular stopping place on their days off duty.

Pop waited anxiously for the Middlesex regiment to get back from Korea. "That's my regiment," he'd say, "and I'm going to feed them some real good old American cooking when they get back. I'll cut the steaks myself." He did, too.

Is a bouncer ever necessary when occasional groups clash in the bar?

Pop rapidly banged a beefy fist twice on the wooden table, once on the arm of his chair and twice again on the head of a nearby diner.

"I never need a bouncer," he snorted.

But Pop's place has class. Just as many families and business executives go to Gingle's for good food and a chance to relax as military personnel of all nations. And the kids in the neighborhood are always sure of a handout at Gingle's. Three-year-old Anthony Flursheim, a recovering polio victim, comes in daily to show Pop how much his walking has improved.

Pop Gingle, honorary member of the commercial air-line pilots' Buzzards Club and a Kentucky Colonel by decree of ex-Governor (now Senator) Earle C. Clements, sits at his world crossroads and tries to be a good friend to man. THE END

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Pop's place is a mecca for servicemen of all nations. These are Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders just back from nine months' Korean action

PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHOR

