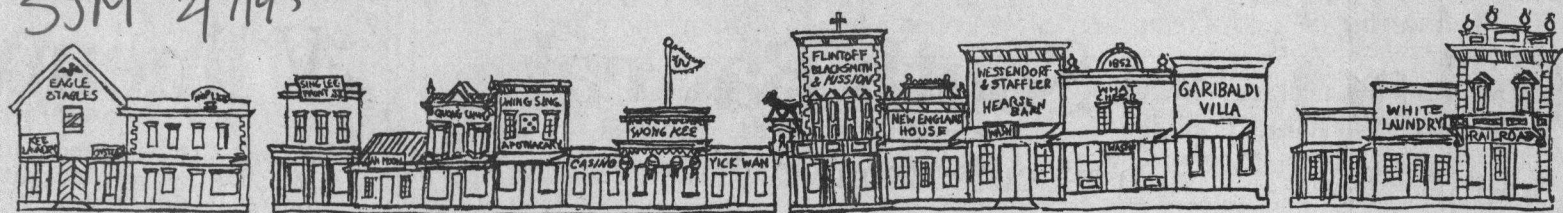


SJM 2/7/95



ROSS ERIC GIBSON ILLUSTRATION

Chinatown in Santa Cruz started south of where the VFW Hall now is and mostly occupied the east side of Front Street down to Cooper.

Chinese in Santa Cruz

A tour through the shops of Santa Cruz Chinatown

BY ROSS ERIC GIBSON
Special to the Mercury News

In the 1880s, teen-ager Ernest Otto liked to take new kids in Santa Cruz on a tour of Front Street's Chinatown.

He was a lifelong friend of the Chinese community, even in the midst of anti-Chinese hysteria, and is the only early source who remembers the Chinese as individuals.

Ernest, who grew up to be a

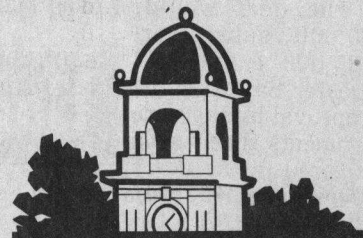
local historian and journalist, got to know many of Chinatown's residents when he was a delivery boy for local and San Francisco papers.

Chinatown started south of where the VFW Hall now stands, and mostly occupied the east side of Front Street down to Cooper. This Ernest-guided tour might start at Eagle Stables, where old Louie Kee was often seen leaving his store-

front laundry with a basketful of clothes on his shoulder to deliver. Kee had a mouthful of cracked teeth and would make a ferocious face at the new kid, then he'd walk off laughing at seeing him jump.

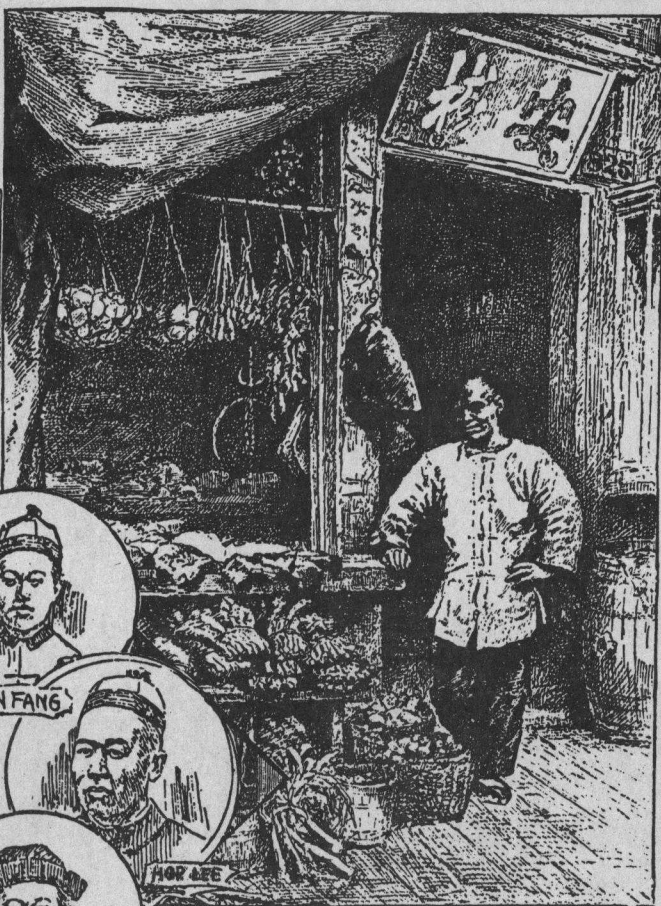
Passing a white-owned brothel, the boys would come to Hop Lee Laundry. It stood across the street from the anti-Chinese "Workingman's Saloon." Hop

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SANTA CRUZ

Historic Perspective



CHINESE MARKET.



ROSS ERIC GIBSON ILLUSTRATION

Drawings of merchants of Santa Cruz's Chinatown and a market on Front Street.

Chinatown tour tells bygone tale

HISTORY

from Page 1B

Lee's smelled of charcoal and incense. The incense gave the clothes a distinctive perfume and came from a small shrine each store had. His shrine was to the god of wealth.

An octagonal stove in the center of the room had flatirons constantly warming. The side-walls had a dozen long table-like ironing boards, each with a bowl of water. Holding the cloth with one hand and ironing with the other, the laundryman would bend down, fill his mouth with water, then spray it on the clothes.

The new boy was startled when he lifted the drape hanging below an ironing board and saw a man sleeping there. Chinatown's 10 laundries ran 24 hours a day. Under each ironing board slept the man who had the next 12-hour shift.

Next door was every boy's favorite stop, where the green porcelain hot water basin hung out front. This symbol meant Chinese barber, and this was where Sing Lee worked. Lee, who had a sixth finger protruding from his right thumb, unbraided the interwoven ribbon from his customers' long pigtail "queue," and hung it on a nail while running a wooden comb through the hair. The face was dipped in a basin of hot water and shaved without soap. The razor was made of roughly hammered triangular steel, with one side highly sharpened. A small board was held in the other hand to catch the hair. Lastly, he shaved the space between the eyebrows.

Then came Ah Moon's General Store. Ah Moon was the first



SANTA CRUZ
Historic Perspective

Chinese settler downtown, arriving about 1853 in the Spud Rush to grow potatoes downtown for the booming market in the gold fields. He rented land from Elihu Anthony behind today's clock tower. When the boom went bust, he opened the town's first Chinese laundry. His wife was the first Chinese woman in town, and his son was the first Chinese child born in the county. When Chinatown moved to Front Street after 1870, he opened his general store there.

Next came the store of Quong Chong, one of two respected merchants called "The Mayor of Chinatown." He sold Chinese clothing and groceries, and his produce displays spilled out into the street. His fruit and vegetables were grown in Chinese market gardens on Mission Street. His shop displayed roast ducks, dried abalone, candied melon, litchi nuts and sugar cane.

After this was Wing Sing Apothecary. Behind the counter was a wall of square drawers and shelves of glass jars displaying dried snakes, lizards, toads, bones, mushrooms and herbs, which were ground for various remedies. Against one wall was a white-matted plat-

form with an oil lamp, where opium clients reclined. A gambling hall was in the back room. Only the Chinese patronized the opium and gambling; the Chinese lottery attracted outsiders.

Beyond another gambling house was Wong Kee Store, the only brick building on the east side of Front Street. The proprietor's real name was Ham Git, but like other Chinese merchants, he was called by the name of his store. Past his back-room gambling hall was the Joss Temple, headed by Wong Kee. The temple often spoke for the Chinese community, so Wong Kee was also called "mayor of Chinatown."

Nearby was the other religious house, the Congregational Chinese Mission, which was above Flintoff Blacksmith shop. While only 10 percent of the local Chinese were members, a majority attended the mission's English language and literacy classes, led by preacher Pon Fang. In China, literacy was little known among the peasants, and thus a popular pursuit in Chinatown. Fang's wife was nicknamed "Little Foot" because she was the first woman with bound feet in Santa Cruz.

After a boardinghouse came Wessendorf & Staffler's Hearse Barn and Coffin Factory; then "What Cheer" hotel and laundry; and the town's first Italian hotel, "Garibaldi Villa."

The "White Laundry" and "Railroad Hotel" at Cooper Street marked the end of Chinatown.

Local historian, architectural consultant and author Ross Eric Gibson writes a weekly history column for the Santa Cruz/Monterey edition.