

CHINA TOWN

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# Small plaque to commemorate Chinatown

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SANTA CRUZ — It won't be easy to see the small bronze plaque soon to grace Front Street to commemorate the site of the last Santa Cruz Chinatown.

The plaque, with its English and Chinese inscription, will be overshadowed by the modern buildings that replaced the shanty Chinatown during a redevelopment project after the San Lorenzo River flooded downtown in 1955.

Crocker Bank, Castagnola's Restaurant, Albertson's grocery store, Long's drug store and a new shopping center by developer Carl N. Swenson Co. now stand on the spot Santa Cruz Chinese used to call home.

Chinese immigrants came to this country by boat to escape the poverty of their native land. What they found when they reached the "Gold Mountain" of California was severe anti-Chinese sentiment and slave working conditions on railroad lines.

During the mid-19th Century the Chinese numbered a few hundred in Santa Cruz. By the turn of the century, their numbers had dwindled to less than 100.

And by the time of the 1955 flood, there was only one Chinese family left in what was called the Birkenseer Chinatown located between Front Street and the San Lorenzo River. The few Chinese still living there after the flood scattered throughout the county when their homes were replaced by the San Lorenzo Park Plaza redevelopment project.

Altogether, there were four Santa Cruz Chinatowns, which were plagued by fire or squeezed out by development.

The Santa Cruz Chinese worked as domestics, launderers, fishermen, railroad builders, truck garden farmers and merchants. They did jobs nobody else wanted. Shirts worn by non-Chinese in anti-Chinese demonstrations during the late 1900s were ironed by Chinese launderers who toiled in laundries that once crammed Front Street.

Now, 30 years after the demise of Birkenseer Chinatown, the city Historic Preservation Commission — at the urging of writer and Chinese history researcher Geoffrey Dunn — has decided on the wording for a plaque to pay tribute to the Chinese as a part of local history.

The plaque, if approved by the City Council, will say in Chinese characters:

"To the Chinese men and women who came to Gold Mountain."

Gold Mountain is what the Chinese called California, said commission Chairman Edna Kimbro.

In English, it will say: "Site of the fourth and last Chinese community, 1894-1955."

The commission wanted to put more on the plaque to explain what had happened to the Chinese in Santa Cruz, but was limited by a \$300 budget, said Kimbro.

"We wanted to include other facts, but couldn't afford it," she said. If there were more money, Kimbro said the commission would like to add these points:

- The last Chinatown was torn down for a redevelopment project.

- The Chinese community numbered three hundred at its peak, and played a vital economic role in the development of Santa Cruz.

- They were very much discriminated against in the 1880s.

- They were active in running stores, laundries, vegetable farms, fishing and railroad line construction on the Santa Cruz-Watsonville-Los Gatos line.

Commissioners would also like to include an English translation of the Chinese

characters, said Kimbro.

Commissioners think a good place for the plaque would be in the sidewalk or on a wall near the new shopping center under construction on Front Street.

The Chinatown plaque is not the only one Kimbro and other local history buffs would like to see.

"It would be nice to observe other historical sites where there are no existing buildings," she said.

Kimbro would like to see a new plaque at DeLaveaga Park to pay tribute to Jose Vincent DeLaveaga, the wealthy Spanish nobleman who gave nearly 600 acres to the city for a park upon his death in 1894.

A resident of San Francisco, DeLaveaga was born in the state of Sinaloa, Mex., in 1844 and bought his first piece of Santa Cruz real estate in 1887 for \$20,000 in gold.

There is a plaque honoring DeLaveaga at the old entrance to the park off Pacheco Avenue where streetcars used to travel, but it's not seen much by the public anymore, said Kimbro.

"I think it would be a social good to remind people that the Hispanics that were here before us left us a tangible legacy in the establishment of that park," she said.