

SUMN JAN 31, 1995

Chinese New Year a big deal in old Santa Cruz



SANTA CRUZ COUNTY HISTORICAL TRUST COLLECTION

Santa Cruz merchant Pon Fano, with his wife and child in an undated photo. He preached at the Congregational Chinese Mission.

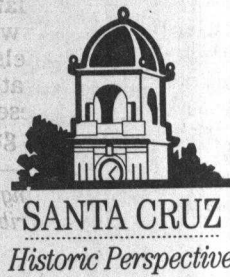
Chinese American Community

Despite hard feelings, whites joined in

BY ROSS ERIC GIBSON
Special to the Mercury News

Today is Chinese New Year, which was a major celebration in old Santa Cruz when nearly half the downtown business district was Chinese.

When white Santa Cruz merchants who wanted to expand moved from Front Street to Pacific Avenue, Chinese businessmen moved into the buildings abandoned on Front in 1870. They also needed to expand, having outgrown their 1860 Pacific Ave-



nue Chinatown, between Walnut and Lincoln streets. Whites called upper Front Street Chinatown, and the Chinese called Pacific Avenue Bok Gwai Guy (White Man's Street).

The proximity of a Chinese district to a Caucasian downtown inflamed anti-Chinese sentiments; some people claimed cheap foreign labor was stealing jobs from "real" Americans. Yet this did not prevent throngs of white residents from crowding into Chinatown to observe the excitement of Chinese New Year. These traditions were recalled by Ernest Otto, who witnessed them in the 1870s and 1880s.

The Chinese lunar new year is the day following the second new moon after the winter solstice. The animals of the Chinese

zodiac somewhat correspond to our solar zodiac. But the Chinese animals represent both a month and a cycle of 12 years. This year, just like 1875, is the Year of the Boar, symbolizing an indulgent creature who is also generous and encouraging to others.

The chief symbol of New Year's renewal is the narcissus plant. The plant used locally was *sui sin fa*, or China lily.

It grew in Chinese vegetable gardens, and in abundance at the river's edge beside Chinatown. These bulbs were collected weeks before New Year's and tended to in rock-filled bowls to make them bloom on New Year's — no blooms meant a bad year. The flowers were then used to deco-

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Chinese New Year, 1870

Tight-knit community held big celebration

■ HISTORY

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rate household altars, and as gifts to friends and employers. Such gifts ended up in many non-Asian gardens.

The three days before the New Year were the only holidays the Chinese took. But this was three days of housecleaning, repairs, refurbishing business signs, and cleaning seldom-washed windows.

Red paper triangles adorned with artificial flowers and two peacock feathers were put up. New perforated red paper was hung over interior doors to baffle the devil, who had to pass through each hole if he wanted to enter. Red paper good-luck signs with Chinese inscriptions were placed in stores and household shrines. Few non-Asians realized the red paper sign placed by their cook behind the stove pipe made their oven a shrine to the stove god.

When the cleaning was done, the Chinese dressed in their most colorful silk finery and went door to door with sacks of money, for all debts must be paid before the New Year.

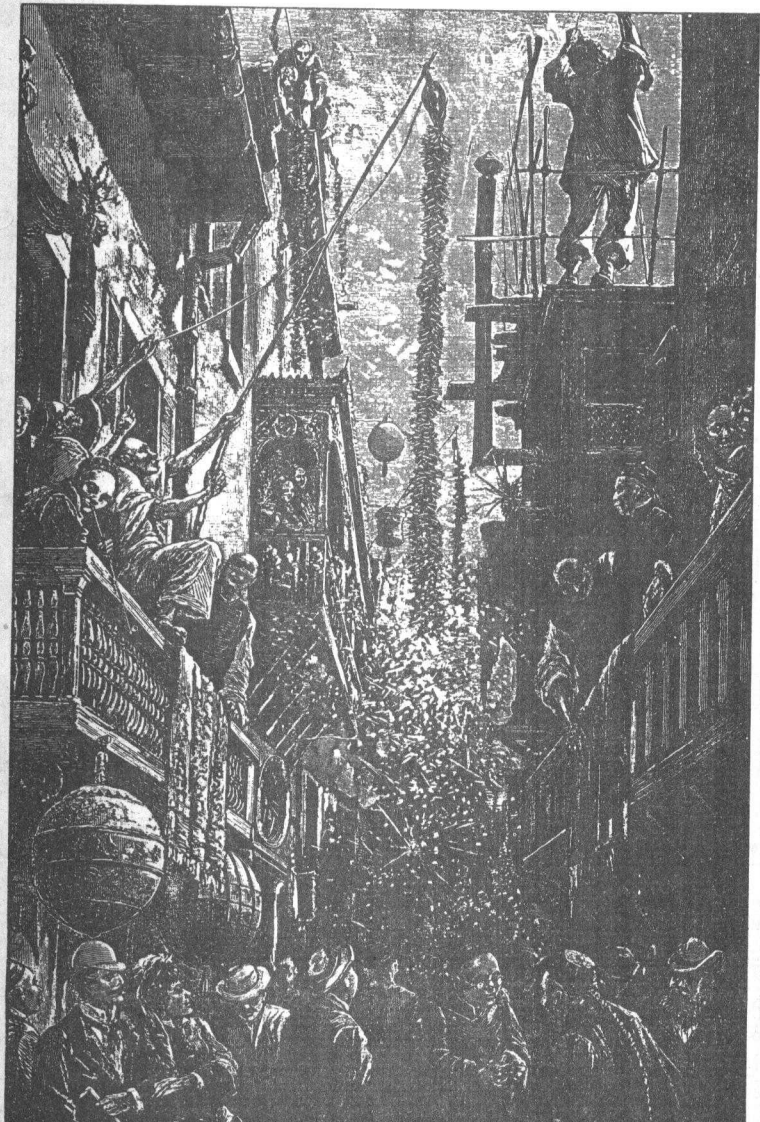
The numerous gambling halls in Chinatown were popular on the holiday. Games included dominoes, pai gow, fan tan, cards and checkers, most of which were invented in China. Mah-jongg wasn't played much locally in the 19th century.

The Chinese temple, called a joss house, was visited during the holidays. For a while it was the back room of a gambling house. Chinese bowed before the shrine, burning incense in a bowl and sprinkling wine on the floor. A roast pig with red inscribed paper on its legs sat in the middle of the floor. Chinese rode horse-drawn coaches up Highway 9 to the more elaborate joss house at the Powderworks. They played Chinese instruments and tossed firecrackers the whole way.

At 4 p.m. on the first day, as each clan completed preparations, they set off strings of firecrackers at a home where

feasting was to begin. The old Chinatown had a row of poplar trees in front, and on New Year's the trees were decorated with long strings of firecrackers from top to bottom. When lit, they showered its red wrappings like cherry blossoms. Locals called them the "popping poplars."

At midnight, shouts of *gung hay fat choy* (happy New Year) were heard, and more firecrackers marked the midnight feast. Coins wrapped in lucky red paper were given as gifts to Chinese boys. During one New Year celebration, a lottery winner broke the bank, and he spent all the winnings on the finest fire-



ROSS ERIC GIBSON COLLECTION

Whites joined in some festivities in California's 19th century Chinatowns, especially in San Francisco.



SANTA CRUZ

Historic Perspective

works show ever seen in Chinatown.

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