

## Local Filmmaking

## Chronicle of the Chinese Past in Santa Cruz

*'Chinese Gold' explores a hidden heritage*

Scene from the film: Don Yee and a companion celebrate the 1954 Chinese New Year at the old Tea Cup. At right, filmmakers Geoffrey Dunn and Mark Schwartz stand behind George Ow Jr.



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**F**EW realize Santa Cruz was once home to a bustling and thriving Chinatown along the banks of the San Lorenzo River. Although today no physical evidence of the old Chinatown remains, the area's railroad, fishing and agricultural industries in the early 20th century were successful largely due to the labor of Chinese immigrants.

"Chinese Gold," the latest from local filmmakers Geoffrey Dunn and Mark Schwartz, sheds light on the forgotten history of the Chinese in the Monterey Bay area.

Based on the book of the same name by local historian Sandy Lydon, the film makes its West Coast premiere next Thursday, Feb. 18 at the Cabrillo College Theater. The screening is expected to sell out and benefits the Cabrillo College Scholarship Fund.

"Chinese Gold" marks the fifth documentary film by Gold Mountain Productions, Schwartz and Dunn's film company. The film premiered at the Hawaiian International Film Festival in December, where it was

well received by the Hawaiian Chinese population.

Originally planned as a short 28-minute film, "Chinese Gold" quickly grew into a 45-minute production. The film includes an impressive collage of photographs and film clips of early Chinese immigrants in the Monterey Bay region, with a voiceover narrated by Wood Choy, star of the film "Chan is Missing."

Swiftly moving into interviews, second- and third-generation Chinese Americans tell their parents' and their own experiences which were shaped by the social, political and economic forces at the time.

"Chinese Gold" strives to acknowledge "the contributions, stories and life histories that are usually overlooked by the major media forms and history," said Schwartz.

Because of Sandy Lydon's 16 years of work for his book, research for the film was less difficult than previous Gold Mountain film ventures. Lydon's expansive written work was a hard act to follow, however. Dunn said creating the narration was the most difficult piece of writing he has done.

"I had to condense, in essence, 550 pages of an incredible book into a nine-minute narration, which is about five pages. It had to be generic enough to appeal to a wide audience, but have a local angle too. It was very difficult to find the tone of the narration — it went through a number of drafts," he said. The book and the movie can't be compared, said Dunn, as the two mediums each have their own strengths.

"I'd say (the film) complements the book. It brings the characters to life. It doesn't possess the magnificent cerebral detail of the book, but it possesses an emotion of its own that's compelling," said Dunn.

Dunn, a native Santa Cruzan and fourth-generation Italian-American, said he was interested in making the film because of his own family heritage in the Santa Cruz Italian fishing community.

"The fishing community and the Chinese community were very much linked traditionally, dating back to the 19th century. I've always had an interest in local history (because) it helps people understand the community better — how we got to where we are today and why certain things are the way they are," said Dunn.

Dunn said that beneath the beauty of Santa Cruz lies an underside, one where newcomers and outsiders faced severe scrutiny and discrimination. The film tries to illuminate the racism suffered by Chinese immigrants and their children so that filmgoers may "understand and grapple with" the more unpleasant aspects of Santa Cruz history, Dunn said.

The film also elucidates the gender discrimination suffered by Chinese women within their own communities. Tradition regarded males as more valuable than females, and more than one woman interviewed tells of the subtle and not-so-subtle ways women were kept in their place.

Produced by local businessman George Ow, the film "Chinese Gold" is a personal journey into his roots as

a Chinese American. Ow felt the need to document the lives of the Chinese in Monterey Bay so future generations will know of their presence.

"I wanted to make sure that (the stories of) the old men I knew would be told. The stories would then be there for my kids, and then their children, so they will know about their roots in this country," said Ow.

Ow compares his interest in his background to author Alex Haley's quest for his "Roots" and believes there are many untold stories in the various different cultures of Santa Cruz.

"There are many stories that should be told ... on the Italian community, the Portuguese community and the Slavonian community in Santa Cruz. You can't find any evidence of (the Santa Cruz) Chinatown. You have to look underneath. So we've only just scratched the surface," said Ow.

While Ow is committed to documenting the experiences of Chinese Americans, he admits other family members aren't as interested in the subject as he. But he believes that one day his efforts will be appreciated, when his family feels the need to know about its heritage.

Dunn added that the "push to assimilate" is often overwhelming, and that immigrant children and grandchildren distance themselves from their ancestors' culture in favor of the predominant culture. He spoke about his own experience as an Italian-American.

"My cousins never learned to speak Italian or to cut fish — they got away from it. I think it's something you get away from because it's different and you want to be part of the mainstream. But after a while you realize you want your own identity. That's the good thing about this work. George's children and other people's children will be able to see their roots, and have something to hold on to that's theirs," said Dunn.

Ow considers himself "All-American with Chinese roots." He said that although "Chinese Gold" focuses on Chinese Americans, it will strike a chord in all Americans, and especially Santa Cruzans.

"It shows the richness of this country," said Ow. "Filmgoers will see stories and pieces of history they would not be able to imagine otherwise. They'll be able to enjoy Santa Cruz more, by knowing more about it. These stories will stir images in their minds that they can relate to in their lives." •

—Rose Dean