



PAUL CHINN / *The Chronicle*

George Lee, top, grew up in Santa Cruz's tiny Chinatown and went on to become a Navy photographer. His pictures of the neighborhood are in the new book "Chinatown Dreams."

A long-gone street called China Lane, above, and an elderly immigrant named Yee Hen Bok, right, are among the subjects photographed by Lee, who died in 1998 at age 76.



A stroll down China Lane

New book recalls once thriving...



New book recalls once-thriving Santa Cruz Chinatown

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By
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George Ow Jr. is walking in downtown Santa Cruz when he stops suddenly on the corner of Cooper and Front streets.

"Right down there, that was China Lane," he says, pointing at the pebbled walkway of an office complex. "And my grandmother's house was right behind that pole. I walk down here and I can *feel* the way it used to be."

The last remnants of Santa Cruz's Chinatown were paved over after the winter of '55, when the churning brown waters of the San Lorenzo River surged into the rickety wooden houses of China Lane and the beloved vegetable garden of Ow's grandmother. But Ow, 60, a businessman and land developer who spent his early childhood in Chinatown, can still make out its ghostly outlines in the cityscape.

"When I come here, I feel like I'm at back home in Chinatown," he says.

Anyone accustomed to San Francisco's sprawling Chinatown might find it hard to imagine having to ferret out a lost one. But, notes Sandy Lydon, a historian in the Monterey Bay region, the historical footprints of the Chinese in California are often faded.

"The Chinese tracings are so delicate, particularly outside San Francisco," Lydon says. "You just have to learn how to see it."

Ow has recently self-published "Chinatown Dreams," a book of photographs and essays that pay tribute to his late uncle, George Lee, an intrepid World War II Navy photographer who documented everyday life in Santa Cruz's lost Chinatown, where he grew up. The 137 photographs in the book are a fraction of the thousands Lee took spanning five generations of his family. In fact, he was said to have identified so closely with his craft that in countless photos of himself, he was never

without a camera in his hands.

Lee was born in 1922 in San Francisco to Canton native S.S. Lee and his wife, Gue Shee Lee. When he was 3, the family moved to Santa Cruz, to what was the city's fourth and last Chinatown — the first three either flooded out or burned down. It had always been a tiny settlement — in 1900 there were only 59 residents. Anti-Chinese sentiment, particularly virulent in Santa Cruz, probably kept the community small. Most Chinese worked in laundries or as cooks, servants or laborers. There were gambling houses, too, which catered mostly to whites.

All seven Lee kids went to public schools. But their world centered on Chinatown, with its worn wooden houses, the tules and willows that served as their playground and steelhead that waited to be caught in the San Lorenzo River.

There were other immigrants, too. It was an Italian

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A photographer's labor of love and memory



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George Ow Jr. visits the neighborhood that was once Santa Cruz's Chinatown, documented in photos by his late uncle, George Lee.

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friend who introduced the teenage Lee to photography. By high school, he was working at a camera store and began taking photos of Chinatown with a German Rolleicord.

Among the most remarkable are several portraits of elderly men who were "longtime Californ," the last generation of sojourners from China who had come to America at the end of the 19th century in search of *Gum Shan*, the "Land of Gold Mountain." Prevented by law from bringing wives from China or marrying local women, they lived out their days in Chinatown.

These elders, who knew where to get free fish heads and pick the best dandelion and mustard greens, had Lee's respect. In the book, they are caught by his cam-

era — Mook Lai Bok smoking a pipe of Bull Durham, Yee Hen Bok stooped as he cuts homemade tofu. In Lee's photos, they are never exotic subjects. Instead, their weathered faces reflect a striking intimacy.

As a young photographer, Lee also had a run-in with California history when he was asked by friends to photograph a family heirloom. The friends were Santa Cruz descendants of James Frazier Reed of the Donner Party. Lee had befriended them as a child, through the family's Chinese cook. The heirloom he photographed was a 4-inch ceramic doll that Reed's 8-year-old daughter, Patty, had carried with her over Donner

Chinatown Dreams: The Life and Photographs of George Lee:
Capitola Book Co.; 129 pages;
\$29.95 paper, \$39.95 cloth.
www.capitolabook.com.

Summit. The doll has been displayed at Sutter's Fort in Sacramento for more than 50 years.

Lee went on to become a military photographer in World War II and the Korean War, shooting with his enormous F-56 Aerial camera. Back home, he married and became a father. He also became the first Chinese to work the front counter at Webber's Photo Shop in Santa Cruz, where he was a fixture for 40 years while shooting pictures for the Sun-Sentinel and the Associated Press. All the while, he was photographing the new generations of Lees, Ows and Lius in the family.

In his later years, Lee joined his nephew's informal breakfast circle of area writers and historians, including Lydon and novelist James Houston. To them, he was "Uncle George." When the idea developed in the group to feature his work in an exhibition and

book, Lee began assembling his photos and slides. He died of a stroke in 1998 at the age of 76 before finishing.

It was two years later that an exhibition of his work opened at the Museum of Art and History in Santa Cruz. The book took three more years and represents a labor of love by friends and family: editor Geoffrey Dunn, book designer Mark Ong and essay writers Lisa Liu Grady, Tony Hill, Morton Marcus, Houston, Lydon and Ow.

It's clear that George Lee saw much through the lens of his camera.

"He used that camera to transcend those limitations and boundaries of the social order," says Hill.

And the pictures he made have rendered those delicate tracings of his ancestors a little more visible.

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