

No one gave Chinese immigrants a break

A tough life in Chinatown

By JOAN RAYMOND
First of three articles

SANTA CRUZ — Santa Cruz didn't hand out any favors to the Chinese back in the days when Chinatown bustled with the daily toil of produce markets and laundries.

The Chinese took jobs that no one else seemed to want — as houseboys, produce sellers and launderers.

At the end of the 19th Century, Chinese laundries crammed Front Street with the Chinese working in hot, cramped quarters at labor that many non-Chinese thought was undignified.

In Santa Cruz, because the Chinese were effectively prevented from working in manufacturing, the laundries, or wash houses, attracted more wash houses as the community grew, says Cabrillo College historian Sandy Lydon in his book, "Visions of Gold: The History of the Chinese in the Monterey Bay Area," to be published in the fall.

"In 1880 there were more Chinese laundrymen in Santa Cruz than all of the rest of the Monterey Bay region combined."

Santa Cruz' several Chinatowns survived fires, floods and vicious anti-Chinese laws. Lydon says Santa Cruz, compared to other cities with Chinese communities in the Monterey Bay region in the 19th Century, nourished the most hostile environment for the Chinese.

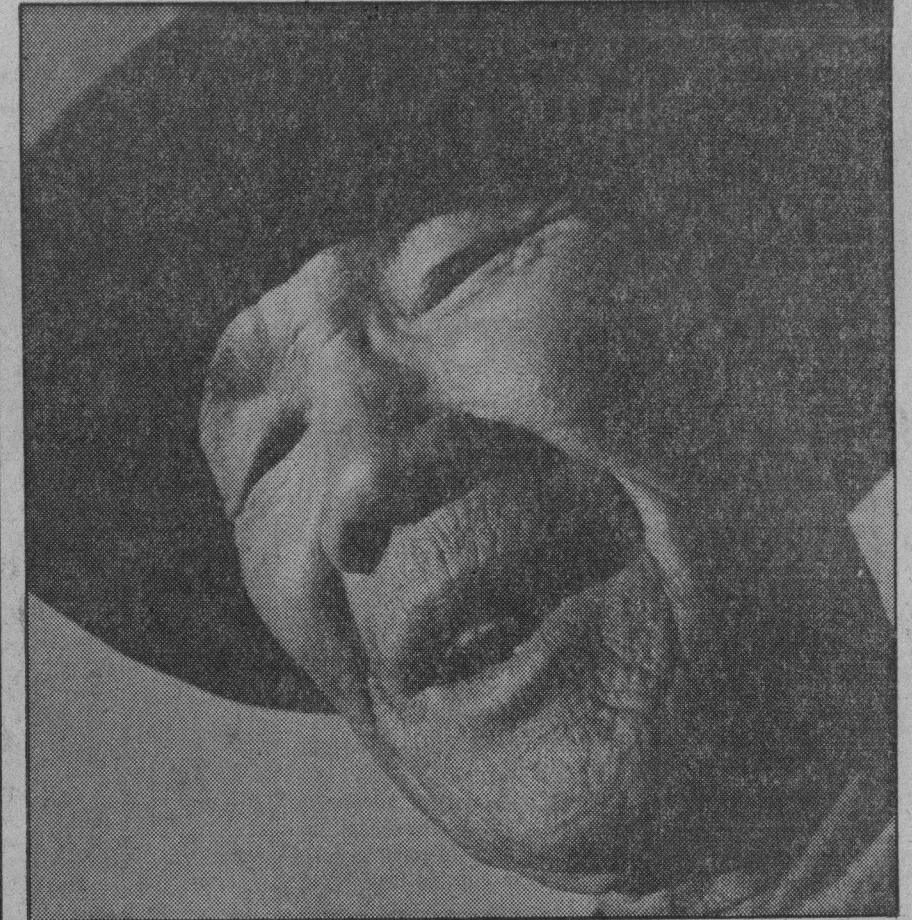
The Santa Cruz community was remarkably small, says Lydon — by 1880 there were perhaps fewer than 100 Chinese.

Also, there were even fewer women and children in Santa Cruz Chinatown than in other Chinatowns throughout the region — "perhaps they didn't think Santa Cruz was a very good place to raise children."

Shirts worn by non-Chinese at anti-Chinese rallies in the 1870s and 1880s were often washed, starched and ironed at a



The last buildings of Chinatown, taken about 1950



Fisherman Ah Fook, in the 1940s

express some commitment and appreciation for that part of our history," said Councilwoman Jane Weed.

Councilman Arnold Levine thought the city should spend no more than \$250 for a plaque, but his colleagues disagreed.

Lee endorses the plaque idea, and so does his nephew, George Ow Jr., 41, a successful businessman following in the footsteps of his father, shopping center developer George Ow Sr.

The younger Ow remembers playing in Chinatown as a kid — "the plum trees and fruit trees, the steelhead and pike. It was really nice for a little kid. There was a lot of room to play...after the flood it really changed, but I always thought of it as

The men agree that by 1955 the houses of Chinatown had fallen into a shabby state.

"The houses were built in 1890. They were single-wall construction. We never really had the money to fix our houses," said Lee.

Ow thinks the plaque is a good idea. "It would bring back a little bit of history that would otherwise be forgotten."

Said Lee: "I don't think a plaque would hurt. It's just too bad the old people won't be around to see it."

NEXT: Why Santa Cruz Chinatown was different.

perhaps they didn't think Santa Cruz was a very good place to raise children."

Shirts worn by non-Chinese at anti-Chinese rallies in the 1870s and 1880s were often washed, starched and ironed at a Santa Cruz Chinese laundry, says Lydon.

Launderers worked 12-hour shifts, seven days a week for low wages.

The workers of one shift would sleep beneath the ironing boards while the second shift ironed above them.

The Chinese, mostly young men, immigrated to America to rise above the poverty of their nativeland, to seek their fortune on foreign soils and to eventually return better off to their families in China.

For centuries, the Chinese had been highly civilized and insulated themselves against the "barbarians" of the West.

But, when the Chinese embarked from their boats on American soil they found the "barbarians" were in charge.

Santa Cruz' first and largest Chinatown was built on Front Street about 1870, according to Lydon.

Lydon said there were 10 buildings, housing 37 men, one woman and one child. All but six of the men were laundrymen; the others included cooks, a house servant and a merchant.

The woman was 36-year-old Tom Sue, a laundress, who lived alone in a separate house.

The merchant Wing Sing later became an influential member of the Chinese community, Lydon notes.

That Chinatown was destroyed by fire in 1894.

Chinatown was rebuilt at two locations — a smaller community of 19 men and no families on the southwest side of town, the site of Chinese market gardens. This Chinatown, called the Blackburn Chinatown after the owner of the property, Mrs. Harriet Blackburn, was wiped out when the Southern Pacific Railroad bought the property for a train yard.

The Chinese shrine, or joss house, at the Blackburn Chinatown was disassembled

The last buildings of Chinatown, taken about 1950

by the Chinese and rebuilt with fanfare at the site of the other, larger Chinatown near Front Street in the flood plain of the San Lorenzo river.

At the turn of the century, Lydon says there were 59 residents at the Birkenseer Chinatown, including one family and four other women. They were cooks, servants, launderers and laborers.

There was one family left at the time of the 1955 flood of the San Lorenzo River.

The Santa Cruz Chinatowns had survived fires and floods, but the last Chinatown did not survive the urban renewal that followed the 1955 flood.

Redevelopment pushed out once and for all the last Chinese family remaining in downtown.

The removal of Chinatown set the stage for the construction of an Albertson's grocery store, Long's Drug Store and Castignola's Restaurant.

"All those urban renewal guys didn't know a damn thing. They promised you the world. I was there. I heard them. But they didn't know anything about urban renewal," says George Lee, 61, a Cabrillo College photography instructor. Lee's mother, Mrs. Gue She Lee, was the last resident of Chinatown before the bulldozers took over.

When Chinatown was here, Santa Cruz gave it few chances for success.

Now that it's gone, city officials want to commemorate it.

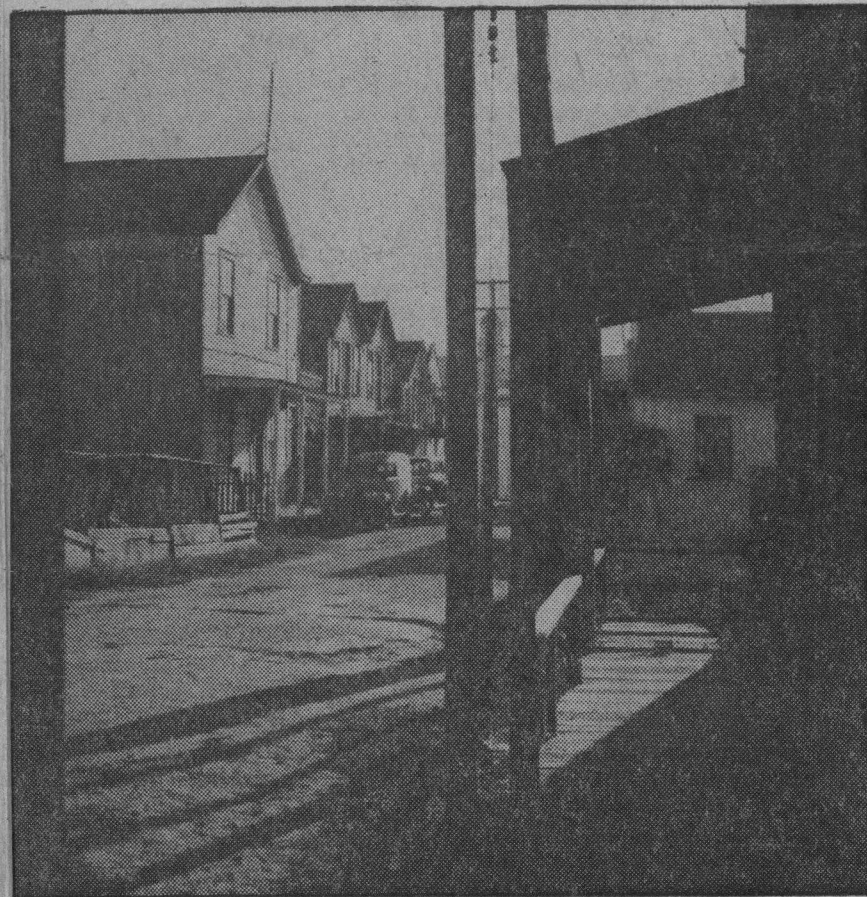
The City Council, following a suggestion by writer Geoffrey Dunn, recently agreed to spend \$500 for a plaque to commemorate downtown Chinatown.

"I think it's important for our city to

Chinatown as a kid — "the plum trees and fruit trees, the steelhead and pike. It was really nice for a little kid. There was a lot of room to play...after the flood it really changed, but I always thought of it as home."

Added, Lee: "I remember running across to the Garibaldi Hotel as a kid, and stealing fruit. At one time you could walk down the streets of downtown and know 95 percent of the people."

Photos by George Lee



"China Lane," near today's UA Cinema, in the 1940s

NEXT: Why Santa Cruz Chinatown was different.

Santa Cruz in the '40s

Here's what was happening in Santa Cruz County during the third week of April in 1944:

The Queen of England accepted with royal thanks a quilt made by the women of the Santa Cruz British War Relief Society.

At long last, the state decided to send fire-fighting equipment to the mid-county area. The first steps were taken to form a volunteer fire department in Soquel.

The YWCA closed a deal to purchase the S.P. Fachutar property on the corner of Walnut and Chestnut avenues for a clubhouse and office.

Wildflowers covered the beach from Cowell's to the rivermouth announcing the approach of summer. In earlier times, before the Boardwalk and summer tourists, these wildflowers had covered a good section of almost the whole area.

A local man willed his estate to the communist party.

The Holy Cross convent was scheduled to be demolished. The state was considering using the site as a park to preserve the Neary adobes adjacent to the convent building.

Citizens celebrated the 40th anniversary of Andrew Carnegie's gift to the area — a new library. The old library had been in existence for 43 years before that.

A local man was arrested for using profane language in front of women and children.

Supervisors accepted a bid for a new bridge to be built over Love Creek in Ben Lomond.



Photographer George Lee