

Old Santa Cruz

● ● By Ernest Otto

In the earliest days of Chinese in Santa Cruz in the early fifties, a group of fishermen settled in this county as in Monterey. It was always said that these were Chinese who lived on houseboats and fished in their own country around Canton.

Their houses were not much of a collection of anything but shacks and were up against the bank at what is known as China Beach at the upper end of the long stretch of beach reaching from Aptos to the dividing line between Capitola beach.

This is now a state park adjoining the New Brighton section.

The houses were about six feet above ground and the bluffs were picturesque with its growth, especially when the evening yellow primroses were in bloom.

The boats were usually beached in front of the village and gave it a real touch of China as they were pointed at each end with a graceful curve.

The village and the boats would be a subject sought by the present day artists with the sandy beach with the boats, the shacks and bluffs in the rear.

They came to town and peddled from house to house. They fished where one of the choicest fish here were caught, the pompano, and folks in town then knew more than those of the present day of that fish.

They did considerable fishing when schools of fish would run close to shore.

With their long nets with large pouches at the end, pulled ashore with ropes, the Chinese would pull in the pouches filled with fish.

The main fish caught in that manner were smelt, herring, sardines, and anchovies. Much of the catch was salted down for bait.

Chinese, the railroad builders of the west, worked in the construction of both the first two narrow gauge roads on the Santa Cruz-Watsonville road and the Santa Cruz-Felton road.

When there was excavating, laying ties, and placing of rails along Chestnut avenue, great crowds were there daily watching their work including, in the middle seventies, the writer.

On the bank of the flood control ditch they had dug out earth and there with the firewood was placed in the section dug, and above, the large metal bowls, where they cooked their rice, meats and considerable of their own food.

Like other Chinese laborers, practically all wore trousers and blouses of the same material as the present day Levi's, and they were workers never wasting time.

Their hats are still worn by workmen in the field made entirely of bamboo with very broad brims and with a small cap-like center. These hats protected them from the sun. Few allowed their queues to hang down their backs, but curled them around their heads.

The eight tunnels over the mountain branch were practically

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all built by Chinese labor. Two were over a mile long, between Glenwood and Laurel and Laurel and Wright.

While excavating the latter tunnel there was a big gas explosion and around 20 were killed.

It was near the latter tunnel that the first oil wells in California were drilled. They all produced with a paraffine base and at Moody gulch wells are still producing.

During the earthquake the two tunnels along the line of the San Andreas fault caved in.

Chinese worked at the California powder works, now Paradise Park. At the village they had their own small Chinatown. They were employed in manufacturing the wooden powder kegs. These were mainly for the blasting powder.

The "Chinese Must Go" campaign headed by Dennis Kearney finally meant they went from the plant.

The great day there was during Chinese New Year when the Chinese from Santa Cruz would make the trip by bus to the accompaniment of the three-piece band, cymbals, drum and gong, and along the way they exploded firecrackers.

When Chinatown was on Pacific avenue, there always was a cigar factory before there ever was one operated by Caucasians.

They could be seen by the passerby as they work in front near the windows.

The Chinese were most liberal and their friends would always receive a cigar or more likely special home-made ones of home production.

About the only other kind of work there was for Chinese with machines was to turn out wrappers, underwear, aprons, etc. These items found a ready sale.