

Santa Cruz Yesterdays



MISSION IN BIRKENSEER CHINATOWN

(From the Preston Sawyer Collection)

For more than a quarter of a century the Chinese colony of Santa Cruz had its mission church, sponsored by the Congregationalists.

Founded in 1881, when Rev. Mahlon Willett was pastor here, the Congregational Association of Christian Chinese was more than 20 years old when the picture was taken.

The building stood on what is now China Lane, a blind alley leading toward the river from Cooper street, east of Front. The Birkenseer Chinatown is the last of the "Chinatowns" which have existed in Santa Cruz from the sixties. The first was on the west side of Pacific avenue between Walnut and Lincoln, dividing later into one area along the east side of Front street northward from near Cooper street and one on the Blackburn property near the present Southern Pacific station. The last gradually has faded almost out of existence, save for the Lee place.

George Birkenseer had develop-

ed his holdings here mainly after burning of the Front street Chinatown in 1894.

Removal of the abandoned picturesque "joss house" of the Gee Kong Tong or Chinese Free Masons marked the passing of a landmark a year ago.

A Loved Leader

One of the two front figures is Miss Mary L. Perkins of Beach Hill, who was a leader in the Chinese mission through most of its years, playing the organ for its music. She died July 6, 1949, at the age of 86, after instructing generations of Santa Cruzans in piano and organ.

The other is Rev. William H. Pond, D.D., of the American Missionary Society, a leader in Congregational mission work among Chinese, Japanese and Negroes, whose visit in Santa Cruz was occasion for the photograph by McKean and Ort, whose gallery was at 123½ Pacific avenue.

The two Caucasian women in

the back row are Martha Ellis and Kate Hall, then active in the mission. Three of the Chinese are Chin Ong, in the light coat, second from the right; On Chong, second from him, and Pon Fang, at the extreme left. In front is little Ah Yum.

Miss Perkins played an important role in the formation here of the first Chinese Christian Endeavor society in the United States.

Ernest Otto says at one time as many as 40 Chinese were members of the local First Congregational church.

Pon Fang, seen in the picture, was a merchant here for many years. He and his family were long active in the church, as he had been earlier in the mission. Last store location used by the Pon family was on the west side of Pacific avenue where Cathcart street was cut through to Cedar. Eldest son, Samuel Pon graduated from the University of California. He took an engineering course.