

GEORGE OW 1919 - 2004

Living the American dream

Influential Chinese-American businessman, philanthropist grew a fortune in the community he always gave back to

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SCOTTS VALLEY

George Ow Sr., a patriarch of the county's Chinese-American community and one of the region's most influential businessmen and philanthropists, died Monday. He was 85.

He died at his home in Scotts Valley with his family at his side.

Born in a poor, rice-farming village of Toisan, China, and having immigrated to the United States at the beginning of World War II, Ow made his fortune developing commercial real estate along the Central Coast. His entrepreneurial vision gave life to Capitola's busy 41st Avenue commercial strip and Scotts Valley's Kings Village Shopping Center.

Despite the scope of his holdings, which came to include more than a dozen major retail sites from Watsonville to Santa Cruz, Ow nurtured his business among his family — seven children and 14 grandchildren — which now runs the real estate operation. His close-knit, intimate style earned him the reputation as a virtuous and community-minded businessman.

"He always said, 'Support the community that supports you, and you'll always be successful,'" remarked longtime friend and Santa Cruz resident Tony Hill.

Friends like Hill invariably describe Ow as a loyal, hard-working individual.

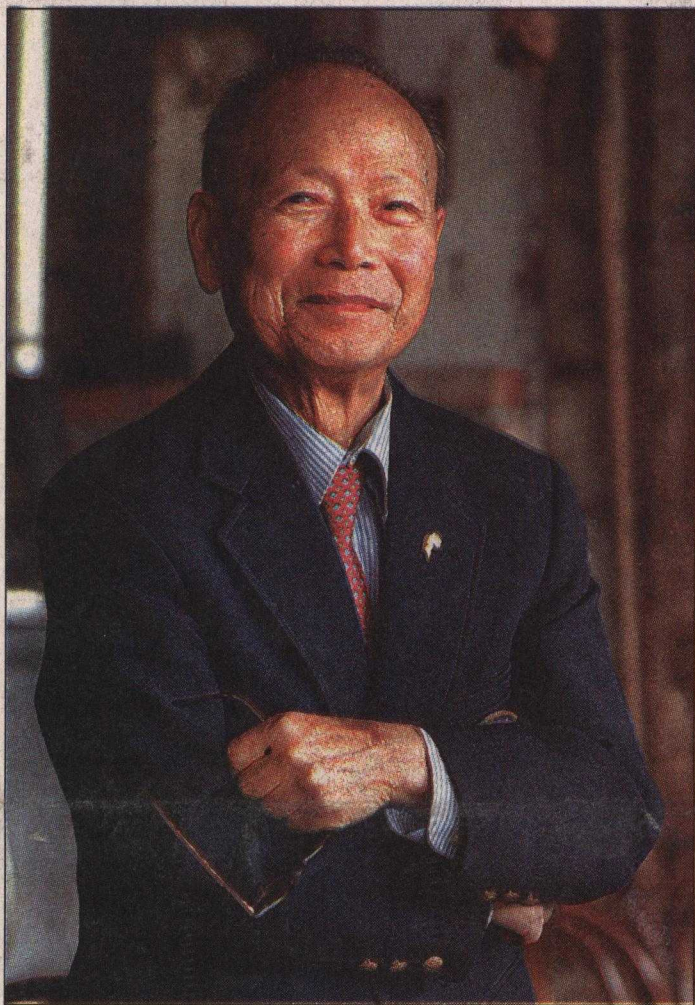


An American dream

Often touted as the quintessential American success story, Ow took the distinction seriously, fostering principles of service and good citizenship through more than three decades with the service group Exchange Club. He was the national organization's first minority president.

Ow also helped put the family's wealth to work through dozens of youth scholarships for minorities, arts groups like Shakespeare Santa Cruz and miscellaneous health foundations.

"He liked helping people. He felt like he got a lot of help and kindness when he needed it, and he wanted to do it for other people, too," said his eldest son George.



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

George Ow Sr., patriarch of a successful, entrepreneurial local family. **BELOW:** The Ow family gathered in 1963 to celebrate December birthdays. **LEFT:** George Ow with his wife, Emily, holding baby David and George Ow Jr. in 1945.



Before acquiring his fortune, Ow came of age in Santa Cruz with little money, at a time when the city's once-well-known Chinatown was beginning to dissolve. The city's mostly poor immigrants, living in small homes on the banks of the San Lorenzo River where the Riverside Theater now stands, had just begun to win acceptance amid racially divided times.

Pioneers like Ow, alongside oth-

ers like his brother-in-law George Lee, took advantage of their rights as minorities to push economic and political boundaries. Having run two successful grocery stores in Monterey, Ow risked buying 12 acres and starting his own store at 41st and Capitola avenues — when the junction was a "cow pasture," according to local history book "Chinese Gold."

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Ow

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Ow's 30,000-square-foot super-market, which opened in 1963, was the only store of its kind in the area, and despite skeptical forecasts in the business community, the store exceeded its expectations.

In the years to come, Sears, Albertson's and Longs would ring the intersection, solidifying the area as one of the county's most viable commercial hubs.

"He was always determined to find what he wanted and make it work," said Sandy Lydon, author of "Chinese Gold."

"His story is a great story," Lydon said.

By the late '60s, Ow's sights had moved north. He purchased the 33-acre Dettling Dairy Farm in Scotts Valley and gave the then-sleepy town a retail corridor in what is today the King's Village Shopping Center, with Nob Hill market and Comerica Bank.

"He created a place for people to shop that made Scotts Valley a more well-rounded community," said Scotts Valley Deputy City

Manager Laura Kuhn.

Another generation

In 1970, Ow turned over the reins of his business to his eldest son but stayed closely affiliated as the business continued to grow.

The family made headlines earlier this year when home-improvement store Lowe's made efforts to occupy the Wrigley building, which is partially owned by the Ows, on the Westside of Santa Cruz.

The deal has since fallen through.

Ow originally was given the chance to embrace American opportunism through his adopted parents, Mr. and Mrs. Lam Pon, who lived in Santa Cruz and brought their son to live with them in the United States when he was 6. He came for four years before moving back to China.

Ow moved to the Central Coast permanently in 1937, to escape the Japanese invasion of China. He began schooling at this time and graduated from Santa Cruz High School in 1940.

In 1942, Ow married Emily Lee, who came from a family that, like the Ows, would also help define

George Ow Sr.

BORN: 1919.

DIED: July 26, 2004.

EDUCATION: Graduate of Santa Cruz High 1940.

OCCUPATION: Real estate investor, entrepreneur.

MILITARY SERVICE: U.S. Army, 1944-45.

SURVIVORS: Sister Anna Lam Liu of Houston, Texas; children George Ow Jr., David Ow, Terry Ow, Richard Ow and Mary Ow Turne, all of Santa Cruz, and Jeanne Ow of Los Angeles; 14 grandchildren; and 10 great-grandchildren.

SERVICES: A viewing will be noon to 8 p.m. Thursday at the Pacific Gardens Chapel, 1050 Cayuga St., Santa Cruz. Services will be 10 a.m. Saturday at the First Congregational Church, Santa Cruz, 900 High St. Arrangements are by Benito and Azzaro Pacific Gardens Chapel, 1050 Cayuga St., Santa Cruz.

the Chinese-American experience in Santa Cruz.

The couple started their married life by working at a market at Mis-

sion Street until Ow was drafted. He served in the U.S. Army during World War II and participated in the allied liberation of the Philippines.

After the war, Ow began his career in commercial real estate by buying interest in the New Monterey Market, near Cannery Row. By 1949, the couple had saved enough to purchase a store of their own, buy a house in Monterey and continue raising a family.

Ow is survived by sister Anna Lam Liu of Houston, Texas; children George Ow Jr., David Ow, Terry Ow, Richard Ow and Mary Ow Turne, all of Santa Cruz, and Jeanne Ow of Los Angeles; 14 grandchildren; and 10 great-grandchildren. He was preceded in death by his wife, Emily, in 1995 and his son Tommy in 2000. Ow had always taken pride in that his children helped in the grocery stores and were taught all aspects of his business. Unlike their father, all of the children attended college.

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