



Climbing Golden Mountain

By Geoffrey Dunn

There are but a few Chinese in Santa Cruz,
because our people hate them, dread them, despise them.

-Duncan McPherson, 1882

PART I

It is the summer of 1885 and three young children are peering into a barbershop on Front Street a few steps from where the Veterans' Memorial Building still stands today. If the children could be stirred to look up, they would see row upon row of rusty horseshoes nailed to the old wooden structure or the barber's sign, "Sing Lee and Front Street," tacked above the door. But their attention is not to be swayed from the scene taking place inside.

Sing Lee, the barber, is carefully unbraiding long strands of silk interwoven with the coarse, black hair of his customer. He disentangles the hair with a wooden comb, then applies near-boiling water to his customer's face and forehead.

With a small triangular razor, he scrapes away the hair until the scalp is almost bleeding. In his left hand he is holding a wooden tray close to his customer's shoulder so that the hair does not fall to the floor. He shaves the ears and the skin between the eyes, places the razor on a stool and, finally, re-braids the silk and the hair from the back of the skull into a foot-long queue, or pigtail.

All of this surely fascinates the diminutive onlookers, but the barbershop provides an even more curious attraction than the shaving of a Chinaman: Sing Lee has six fingers on his right hand.

The children stare at the small piece of flesh and bone protruding from the barber's right thumb. One of them giggles, then another. Sing Lee turns and glares back at his young audience through the window of his shop.

What the children see in those brown eyes set in eternity is a matter of speculation. Perhaps they see the rice fields and ancient temples of the great land to the west from which Sing Lee ventured. Perhaps they see the torch lights which would come to drive Sing Lee and 300 of his fellow countrymen away from the city of the Holy Cross.

Or perhaps they see even further into the future--to the parking lots and concrete buildings which would come to serve as a mausoleum for a time that once was and would never be again.

The children look nervously at one another. It is getting near the noon hour and, without saying a word, they hurry back to their homes.

The Chinese community in which "Sing Lee and Front Street" conducted business a century ago was the second of four Santa Cruz Chinatowns. The first was located on what is now Pacific Avenue, between Walnut and Lincoln Streets, and dates as far back as 1859.

It lasted until the 1870s, when downtown business merchants shifted their center of activity from Front Street to Pacific Avenue and the Chinese moved to the quieter location on Front Street. In spite of considerable anti-Chinese sentiment and activity, that Chinatown lasted for nearly two decades, boasting a population of well over 100 residents, 10 laundries, three herb stores, opium dens and gambling halls.

Then in 1894 the Great Santa Cruz Fire, which destroyed the County Courthouse on Cooper Street and much of the downtown business district, also claimed the Front Street Chinatown as a victim. Many of the Santa Cruz Chinese, particularly members of the Gee Kong Tong (or Chinese Free Masons), moved to the Blackburn Ranch on West Sycamore Street near the Southern Pacific Railroad Depot.

Still other members of the Front Street community (many of whom belonged to the Congregational Association of Christian Chinese) moved around the corner to Bellevue Place, which ran east to the San Lorenzo River from where Cooper Street intersects with Front Street. The Chinese set up residence there in a series of ramshackle homes owned by a prosperous German immigrant, George Birkenseer.

There were numerous other Chinese communities in Santa Cruz County during the late 1800s: a small colony of Chinese who harvested abalone and seaweed just north of Davenport; another colony of about 30 fishermen just south of Capitola at what is now New Brighton State Beach; small camps of railroad workers throughout the San Lorenzo Valley; and a large Chinatown in Watsonville.

But Birkenseer's--located approximately where Coast Commercial Bank and the U.A. Theatres now stand--was the fourth and final Santa Cruz Chinatown. During the 1920s, white residents from as far away as San Jose and Fresno would flock into Birkenseer's to gamble, womanize, drink white whiskey, and a few, even, to smoke opium. Locals came to have their clothes washed or to purchase herbs. At least 14 buildings were occupied by the Chinese there as late as 1928.

"It was a lively place back then," remembered the late Malio Stagnaro, a Santa Cruz native who sold fish to the Chinese back in the Twenties. "Always lots of gambling, good food. The Chinese treated their patrons well."

By the mid-1930s, however, local authorities began cracking down on the gambling, drugs and bordellos (which were then owned and operated exclusively by whites in Birkenseer's), so that by the beginning of World War II, only four dwellings were occupied by the Chinese.

In 1952, all but one of the Chinatown shacks were boarded and vacant. Mrs. Gue She Lee, her second husband Arnold Sima, and her youngest son, Jun Lee, were the last residents of Chinatown. When the flood of 1955 swept through the city, they, too, were forced to leave and make way for the redevelopment project which brought Albertson's, Longs and the UA Theaters to Santa Cruz.

The bulldozers did their dirty work and the last remnants of the Santa Cruz Chinatown crumbled. All that remained were the ghosts.

There are some who believe that the first Chinese to come to the Americas arrived here over a thousand years ago on sturdy wooden junks capable of trans-Pacific voyages. Anthropologists have noted striking similarities between symbols used by the Olmec tribes of Mexico and the peoples of Southern China, but so far positive proof of such cross-cultural interaction has yet to be established. In any event, the first confirmed Chinese immigrant to California was a cook named Ah Nam, who arrived in Monterey some time before 1815.

Mid-nineteenth century China, much like Ireland on the other side of the earth, was a nation plagued by war, floods, famine and banditry. The nation had recently been defeated by Great Britain in the Opium War of 1840, leaving the Chinese economy virtually in ruins.

Word that gold had been discovered in California quickly spread through Hong Kong to China's coastal provinces. Thousands of young men, almost all of them from the Canton region, journeyed across the Pacific, hoping to bring back enough wealth to alleviate the misery of their impoverished families.

By 1860, over 30,000 Chinese "pioneers," mostly between the ages of 17 and 35, migrated to the land of the "Golden Mountain."

While they were greeted with curiosity upon their arrival in San Francisco, the Chinese met with considerable hostility in the goldfields of the Sierra Nevada. They were often run off of their claims, scores were killed, and the promise of a fast fortune turned to dust.

Many of the Chinese driven from the mines took positions with the Central Pacific Railroad Company. "Without them," the Central's president, Leland Stanford declared, "it would be impossible to finish the western portion of this great national highway." It was largely with Chinese labor that the Central Pacific completed the monumental task of laying track over the rugged Sierras and across the Nevada and Utah deserts.

Still other unsuccessful miners filtered back to the coast. Many Chinese came to Santa Cruz County, and once here they also found railroad work. They dug tunnels and laid track from Los Gatos to Santa Cruz for the South Pacific Coast Railroad, and from Santa Cruz to Watsonville for F.A. Hihn's narrow-gauge rail.

At least 31 Chinese shovel workers were killed in 1878 while digging the mile-long Summit Tunnel in the Santa Cruz Mountains. When the railroads were finished, most Chinese found work as day laborers, domestic help or in laundries.

Reports published by the U.S. Census Bureau indicate that there were 156 Chinese living in Santa Cruz County in 1870, 523 in 1880, and a peak of 785 in 1890 when the county's white population totaled less than 20,000.

The most prominent feature of the Santa Cruz Chinatown was its absence of women. Reports vary, but it can be reasonably assumed that there were less than two dozen Chinese women living here at any one time prior to 1920. Santa Cruz was not unique in this aspect. In 1890, for instance, the ratio of Chinese men to women in California was 22 to 1.

Chinese custom of the nineteenth century dictated that wives were to remain in the home, even when their husbands went abroad. Many Chinese women during this period still had their feet bound. Those women who came to California were largely unmarried, widowed, or the wives of wealthy merchants.

The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which restricted the immigration of Chinese laborers, also barred the entrance of their wives. After 1882 those Chinese men who were already working in California could not call on their families to join them.

Thus the Chinatowns of the West Coast were "bachelor societies"--societies in which the men were lonely and sexually frustrated, while the women were outcasts and often abused. The few Chinese women immigrants who weren't married to merchants frequently found themselves serving as unwilling prostitutes. Many were brought here exclusively for that purpose.

Although it does not state so specifically, the U.S. Commerce report for Santa Cruz County in 1880 hints at the existence of seven Chinese prostitutes in the Front Street Chinatown. The report identifies seven "unemployed women" living with a male "cook" at a single residence. The women were unrelated. That this could have been anything but a bordello is unlikely.

Given the absence of any family structure, California Chinatowns were organized on large-scale social units. One such level of organization was the secret society or "tong." These societies developed in China during the seventeenth century to oppose the Manchu dynasty, and they reproduced themselves on the West Coast.

In Santa Cruz, virtually all of the Chinese prior to 1890 were members of the Gee Kong Tong, or Chinese Free Masons. They met in a temple called a "joss house" by whites, where they unbraided their queues (marks of subjection mandated by the Manchus) and repeated oaths to free their native land.

There were temples at each of the four Chinatowns, the last being located on the banks of the San Lorenzo River near the present-day UA Theatres. It was torn down in 1950.

"The interior of the joss house," according to Ernest Otto, "featured pictures of ancient heroes of China who had become deified. The shrine was in an alcove at one end of the room. A continuing burning light was before the shrine. Smoke from burning incense of sandalwood, punks and red candles had, through the years, so blackened the figures on the sacred pictures, the characters could scarcely be seen."

The leader of the Santa Cruz secret society was Wong Kee, a colorful local merchant who on holidays, Otto recalled, "Wore a black horsehair skull cap topped with buttons of red silk or coral beads" and robes which were "in tones of emerald green, Chinese reds, lavender, and navy blue." The local whites referred to him as "the town mayor."

Wong Kee's store was located in the only brick building in Chinatown. In it could be found copper pots, kettles, ribbon, firecrackers, rice, oysters, shark fins, sweet bamboo sprouts, okra, teas, hams and dried fish.

The second floor housed a gambling hall, where "fan tan," "pie gow," and Chinese checkers were played. All business transactions were calculated on an abacus.

Another joss house was located at the California Powder Works on the San Lorenzo River, where Paradise Park is presently located. Scores of Chinese men (perhaps as many as 100) lived and worked there during the 1870s, when the company had one of the two government contracts to produce smokeless gun powder for the U.S. Army.

The other major organization in Chinatown was the Congregational Association of Christian Chinese. It was founded here in 1881 by the Reverend Mahlon Willet. Later, a Chinese cook and merchant named Pon Fang was sent to Santa Cruz by Willet's missionary group to head the Chinese congregation.

In 1892 Pon Fang established the first "Chinese Christian Endeavor Society" in the United States. Forty residents of the Santa Cruz Chinatown were members. The society met on Friday nights, Pon Fang teaching his followers how to read and write English along with the fundamentals of Christianity.

Since he was a merchant, Pon Fang was able to bring his wife and young son, Samuel, to the U.S. His wife (whose name apparently was never recorded in the press) was the first woman in the Santa Cruz Chinatown to have bound feet. While living here she gave birth to four more children: Joseph, Ruth, Esther and Daniel.

After the Great Earthquake and Fire of 1906, the population of the Santa Cruz Chinatown began to dwindle and interest waned in the Congregational mission. Pon Fang, like many local Chinese, moved to San Francisco, taking his family with him.

PART II

Aside from performing tasks as day laborers, many Chinese men worked in the laundry business. In 1880 there were already 19 Chinese laundries in the county, employing 70 workers full time. Ten were located in downtown Santa Cruz.

Because most white males felt laundry work beneath their dignity, the Chinese were able to enter the wash house business with a minimum of resistance. Chinese laundries were labor intensive and required little initial investment. They rapidly became the foundation of the Chinese economy.

On entering a Chinese laundry, Otto recalled in one of his historical columns, "One saw a long ironing board against the wall on each side, with six or seven men ironing ... At the side of each was a sauce bowl filled with water set on top of a starch box. The Chinese, wearing white cotton blouses, would bend over to fill their mouths with water and then spray it over the clothes to dampen them." Rocks behind the wash houses were used for beating the clothes.

Chinese gardeners provided the Santa Cruz community with a large supply of its fresh fruits and vegetables. In 1885 the Santa Cruz *Surf* reported 125 "soil cultivators" in the city earning \$20 a month. One large Chinese garden was located at the Blackburn Ranch near Chestnut and West Sycamore Streets, and another off King Street above what is now Mission Hill Junior High.

Henry Biekiewicz, a Polish visitor to the West Coast in the 1870s, reported that "the fruits and vegetables, raspberries, and strawberries under the care of Chinese gardeners grow to a fabulous size. I have seen strawberries as large as small pears and heads of cabbage four times the size of European heads." Chinese vegetable peddlers sold their produce from overflowing baskets balanced on shoulder poles.

The first commercial fishing in Monterey Bay was done by the Chinese, although that industry, particularly after 1880, was centered on the Monterey Peninsula. The Santa Cruz Chinese--like their counterparts in San Francisco and New York-- developed close ties with the Italian fishing colony. The Italians provided Chinatown with a variety of fish (petrale sole, gopher cod, octopus and pompano), which the Chinese dried on racks located near the San Lorenzo River.

When the Chinese weren't working (and perhaps even when they were), they were often under the influence of opium. The British had imported the habit from India to China in the nineteenth century, and the Chinese brought it with them to America.

Otto claimed that the drug was smoked by a "high percentage" of the local Chinese population. Nearly every shop or laundry had a small room or den set aside for opium consumption. The room usually had a selection of water pipes and a mattress of some sort on which the user could pass out.

One of the biggest opium busts in the history of Santa Cruz Chinatown took place on November 25, 1925. Wong Tai Yut was arrested that day by the local sheriff with "two large tins" of the drug estimated in value at \$400.

By far the greatest celebration in Chinatown occurred during the Chinese New Year. The Chinese stopped working for three days and prepared huge, elaborate meals for the festivities. "Dinners were served with the finest delicacies," Otto recalled, "pork, chicken, bird's nest soup and shark fins."

On February 1, 1915 the local daily reported that "the Chinese New Year was ushered in last night by a fusillade of firecrackers, feasting and worship. But the New Year is observed less and less each year as the Chinatown population decreases..."

By then, wounds from an ugly chapter in Santa Cruz history may have been forgotten--but they had surely taken their toll.

To state that the Chinese were "driven out" of Santa Cruz, as some historians have suggested, is to oversimplify greatly the complex web of social, political and economic forces which eventually resulted in the demise of the local Chinese community; but certainly, the whites did attempt to drive them out.

There were three great waves of anti-Chinese sentiment here, the first beginning in the late 1870s, the second in 1882 and the third commencing in 1885. At the center of all three was Duncan McPherson, editor and publisher of the Santa Cruz *Sentinel*.

In 1879 a *Sentinel* editorial written by McPherson characterized the Chinese as "half-human, half-devil, rat-eating, rag-wearing, law-ignoring, Christian civilization-hating, opium smoking, labor-degrading, entrail-sucking Celestials."

McPherson, of course, was not the only racist in the state, and California's anti-Chinese movement did not begin here in Santa Cruz. As early as 1850 the Chinese were referred to in the press as "rats," "mongrels" and "low-animals." In the winter of 1867, the first formal anti-Coolie organization drove laborers away from their jobs on San Francisco's Potrero Hill. A few months later, a Chinese vegetable peddler was stoned to death there by an angry mob of youths.

The incipient anti-Chinese sentiment spread throughout the West Coast and culminated in 1877 with the establishment of the Workingmen's Party of California. While its platform contained a number of decidedly radical proposals designed to redistribute wealth, the Workingmen's Party was first and foremost an anti-Chinese organization. Its demagogic leader, Denis Kearney, called for the immediate deportation of all Chinese laborers from the state.

"Are you ready to march down to the wharf and stop the leprous Chinaman from landing?" Kearney once addressed an angry mob. "The dignity of labor must be sustained even if we have to kill every wretch that opposes it... The Chinese must go!"

By January of 1878 the Workingmen's Party had become a major political force in California.

Seventy-five miles down the coast, the Workingmen's organization took on a uniquely Santa Cruz flavor. In San Francisco the organization was made up largely of white workers--men and women who feared their livelihoods were threatened by cheap Chinese labor. In Santa Cruz, where the Chinese generally didn't compete with whites for jobs, the Workingmen were composed largely of the landed gentry and businessmen.

The president of the local Workingmen's club was Elihu Anthony, a wealthy industrialist, landowner and Methodist minister. Its most vociferous sympathizer was McPherson, who not only published the *Sentinel* but according to E.H. Harrison's *History of Santa Cruz*, had "more buildings in this city than any other man."

Suspiciously missing from the Santa Cruz Workingmen's platform were the party's plans for redistributing wealth, save for occasional attacks on the railroads. An entire section of the platform, however, was devoted exclusively to the Chinese:

"Chinese cheap labor is a curse to our land, a menace to our liberties and the institutions of our country and should be restricted and forever abolished; and no citizen shall be eligible for membership into this club who employs or knowingly patronizes in any form, shape or manner that class of people known as the Chinese."

The first direct action taken by the local Workingmen was aimed at the Chinese laundries. In March 1880 the club requested that the Santa Cruz City Council remove all Chinese wash houses from within the city limits. The Council balked at that blatantly racist proposal, but three months later passed a law which had a similar effect.

On June 5, 1880 the Council adopted the following ordinance: "No person shall carry baskets or bags attached to poles carried upon back or shoulders on public sidewalks." Chinese deliverers were forced from the safety of the sidewalks into the roadway, but the industry survived the restrictive legislation. The ordinance was later declared unconstitutional.

Meanwhile, the United States Congress in Washington was beginning to express concern with the growing anti-Chinese activities, sending a commission to the West Coast with orders to investigate the situation. In 1882 legislation was introduced in the Senate which would restrict Chinese immigration for 20 years.

Both houses of Congress passed the bill, but President Chester Arthur vetoed it on April 4 of the same year.

Santa Cruzans were irate with the President's decision. Three years earlier, County residents had voted 2540 to 4 in favor of restricting Chinese immigration, and they were determined to keep further Chinese from entering their community.

Arthur's veto spurred a spontaneous parade in downtown Santa Cruz. Fanned by the rhetoric of McPherson, who declared, "The Chinese are a scab on the face of our state," local residents burned Arthur's effigy at the lower downtown plaza.

Later that year, Arthur signed a slightly modified version of the Chinese Exclusion Act, which was amended in 1884, extended indefinitely in 1902, and wasn't repealed until 1943. For over 50 years, Chinese laborers and their wives were barred from entering this country.

The final great wave of the local anti-Chinese movement had its beginnings in February 1885 and culminated a year later. By then local Sino-racism was stripped of its Workingmen's facade. The state "Non-Partisan Anti-Chinese Association" had active clubs in Watsonville, Aptos, Boulder Creek and Felton. In downtown Santa Cruz, Anthony and McPherson remained at the forefront of the movement.

Once again Chinese laundries provided the initial focus for their attack. A health ordinance regulating sewage disposal was aimed directly at Chinese wash houses. Soon after the local association called for a boycott of all Chinese merchants (including vegetable peddlers) and even white-owned businesses which employed Chinese.

McPherson and his associates didn't stop there. Perhaps motivated by economic self-interest, the *Sentinel* publisher called for an extension of the boycott to include his competition, the *Santa Cruz Surf*, whose fiery editor, A.A. Taylor, had opposed the original boycott on the grounds that it divided the white community.

A vitriolic debate ensued between the two men. Finally, on December 14, 1885, Taylor played his trump card. "The poor man who buys a beet from a Chinaman's basket ought to be boycotted," the *Surf* editorial argued, "[but] the man who sells or rents to a Chinaman is a reformer and ought to be made governor."

In one of the great ironies of local history, it turned out that McPherson himself was the landlord of a Chinese laundry and that he had been collecting rent from the "entrail-sucking Celestials" for quite some time. "I have made a living out of the paper," McPherson once boasted, "and money out of real estate."

Taylor eventually won a lawsuit from the *Sentinel* and the paper's business manager was later cited by the state Anti-Coolie League "for failure to act in good faith."

The *Sentinel-Surf* battle, however, did little to curb local Sinophobia. On February 27 of the following year, the Anti-Chinese Association staged a county-wide torchlight parade down Pacific Avenue. Hundreds of association members participated in the march, carrying banners and shouting, "The Chinese must go!"

But the Chinese stayed. In what is surely a tribute to the internal solidity of their Front Street community, the Santa Cruz Chinese withstood the decade-long effort to drive them out. A major fire in 1887 and the Great Fire of 1894 finally forced them to move their community, but they did so largely on their own terms--and they didn't move far.

It would be all too easy to attribute the anti-Chinese sentiment which infested this area to the economic depression which struck California in the late 1870s and lasted for most of the following decade. Unemployment rates in San Francisco, for instance, skyrocketed during this period, a factor which certainly contributed to the bitterness of the white working class.

Such was not the case in Santa Cruz. There was some unemployment here, to be sure, but the whites were not competing with the Chinese for work. Rather, it seems more likely that the white business community feared the competition of successful Chinese merchants and attempted to drive them from the marketplace. Old-fashioned racism served as the axle of their movement, and the well-publicized bigotry of Duncan McPherson and his ilk greased it for over a decade.

While the boycotts and torchlight parades failed in their short-term objectives, they had long-term implications which eventually resulted in the demise of the Santa Cruz community. The restrictive legislation which outlawed the immigration of Chinese laborers and women cut the lifeline of the local Chinatown. Business regulations prevented the Chinese from entering the economic mainstream. Without new blood or the opportunity for social mobility, the Chinese community atrophied. Only a handful of Chinatowns on the West Coast survived the subsequent economic and social decay.

In the 1980s, the Evergreen Cemetery which overlooks Harvey West Park is a quiet, serene setting, save for a few hikers and stray dogs who wander through its pathways. High up one of its southeastern slopes there is a sprawling bay tree and a cubic structure which looks something like a small incinerator.

Beneath the shadow of the sprawling bay are headstones with Chinese characters on them, another which reads "Chinese Burial Ground, January 1, 1901," and still another reading "Lee Song, 1851-1929." It was on this small plot of soil that most of the Santa Cruz Chinese were buried.

"Chinese funerals were elaborate affairs," according to Renie Leaman, a longtime friend of the cemetery. "Most of Chinatown turned out for the gatherings." When a member of the Santa Cruz community passed away, a seer or astrologer was consulted to discern the proper day to conduct the burial. Sometimes the wait lasted as long as two weeks.

A pair of horse-drawn wagons led the funeral processions, one carrying the casket, the other carrying wooden baskets loaded with oranges, apples, chickens, roast pig, firecrackers and all the possessions of the deceased.

Behind the carriages, men swirled paper streamers to scare away the devil. There were thousands of holes in the streamers, and the Chinese believed that the devil had to pass through each one in order to get to the dead person's soul. Occasionally, a member of the procession stomped on the streamer, hoping that the devil had become entangled in the holes. Firecrackers were also exploded to ward off evil spirits.

At the graveyard the casket and baskets were hauled up the hill. Chinese music and the smell of burning herbs filled the air. The deceased's possessions were set on fire in the holy oven, while the baskets of food were situated around the grave and some coins were placed in a plate so that the deceased would not go into the next life without wealth. But their bodies did not remain in Evergreen.

Many of the Chinese who came to Santa Cruz in the 1800s did not intend to stay here. Certainly, they did not intend to die here. After a body had been entombed for a decade, it was dug up by family members or friends, packaged, and sent back to China.

"This is a cherished burial custom," the *Sentinel* noted in an article dated November 4, 1925. "The Chinese believe that their bones should have as a final resting place the soil of their flowery kingdom, and no matter where they die, the bones are unearthed and sent to the burial ground of the villages of their birth." Eighteen bodies had been disinterred earlier that afternoon.

Scorned and oppressed in America, the Santa Cruz Chinese made sure that their spirits would not meet the same fate. The land of the Golden Mountain may have taken their sweat and blood, may have turned their dreams into dust and their culture into a laughing stock, but it would never claim their souls.

Source

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