

# Chinese find land of opportunity

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Last in a series

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*"Sticks and stones will break my bones,  
But words will never hurt me."*

SANTA CRUZ — If hard labor by itself could build a financial empire, the Chinese immigrants would have paved a golden road back to their homeland from America.

Instead, the reward for their bitter toil — whether it be dangerous, backbreaking work in railroad tunnels or sweating over hot irons in a laundry — was often empty pockets or an early grave on foreign soil, or both.

Long before Szechuan cuisine became popular in American cities, the Chinese immigrants were treated with the same contempt still given to Mexican "illegal aliens" seeking work in California.

The Chinese were recruited to do the hardest work for low wages in building American railroads, but when it appeared they were capable of becoming business successes, anti-Chinese laws were passed.

Says Sasha G. Lewis in his book, "Slave Trade Today:"

"The emerging alliance between nativist and labor leaders was finally successful in 1882, in getting Congress to act against Chinese immigrants.

"They had been recruited to do the heavy and dirty work of building railroads and washing white men's laundry, but had saved their money, and began to settle down and open up business of their own, and began to look more like permanent residents than just cheap, coolie labor who could be kicked and shoved around."

The immigration laws and citizenship restrictions were a tightly-woven tapestry of prejudice that fell on the immigrants to smother their hopes and dreams.

But there were holes in the pattern of racism. Some Chinese used the loopholes

to their advantage and actually had something to show for their toil.

When China became an American ally in World War II, the Exclusion Act was lifted.

The year was 1943 and also marked the start of a third generation of a successful Chinese business empire in Santa Cruz County.

George Ow. Jr., 41, was born in 1943, the son of shopping center developer George Ow Sr. and the grandson of Lam Pon, a pioneer in the Santa Cruz apple drying industry.

"My father should have been named 'Lam,' but the papers he received before coming to America, listed him as an 'Ow,'" said the son.

Lam Pon arrived in America sometime before the turn of the century and was a laundryman and cook in Santa Cruz Chinatown, writes Sandy Lydon in his yet-to-be released book, "Chinese Gold: The History of the Chinese in the Monterey Bay Region."

In 1905 Lam Pon signed a lease with Ralph J. Mattison of Aptos to build an apple drier on a field behind the Bay View Hotel in Aptos. The business was a success, and Lam Pon set up a credit bureau for fellow Chinese, according to Lydon.

Lam Pon returned to China several times. On one of those trips, his wife gave birth to a son in Canton. The son came to be known as George Ow Sr.

Lam Pon returned to Santa Cruz, leaving his son in Canton to be educated.

According to Lydon's account, in the 1930s Lam Pon returned to Canton, never to come back to Santa Cruz.

The apple drying business had fallen into the hands of Lam Pon's relative Otto Lam.

As recently as 1982, Lydon says Otto Lam sold the business, called the Santa Cruz Fruit Company, marking the end of an era.

The Santa Cruz Fruit Company drier was the last Chinese drier in the United States, says Lydon.

In 1936, George Ow Sr. boarded a ship and came to America. His relatives owned the Canton Market in downtown Santa Cruz.

Ow learned the grocery business in Santa Cruz, graduated from Santa Cruz High School in 1940 and two years later married Emily Lee.

The Ows started a grocery store in Monterey. From there, the Ow's business world expanded.

Ow scouted business opportunities in Santa Cruz in the sleepier days of the county, before 41st Avenue had become a strip of fast-food restaurants.

A cow pasture at a four-way intersection off Highway 1 at the corner of Capitola Road and 41st Avenue seemed to Ow like a good location for a new grocery store.

He told Lydon: "I did a lot of reading, and I always remembered that the most valuable intersection was the first four-way intersection off a freeway interchange."

The Ows called the market, "Kings", and the shopping center that later developed around it came to be known as Kings Plaza — today one of the busiest shopping complexes in the county.

Ow gave Lydon this explanation for choosing the name: "Actually, I had driven around the San Francisco Bay Area and had noticed a store named 'Kings.' It had a nice, regal sound to it, and, it was a short name — a large neon sign for Kings would cost half that of a sign that said something like, 'Albertson's.'"

Ow used his same theory about the four-way intersection near a freeway to buy a another shopping center site, in another cow pasture, off Mount Hermon Road in Scotts Valley. The second shopping center came to be known as Kings Village.

Mrs. Ow managed to work in the grocery store and to tend to their seven children, five boys and two girls. All the children were sent to college.

George Ow Jr. believes his parents' key to success was a combination of hard work and foresight.

"We were lucky in that my mother and father worked hard. They were farsighted enough to think beyond what they had. Plus, they gave us an education, so that we had the opportunity to mix practical business experience with a formal business education.

"My father worked for 30 straight years, 12 to 14 hours per day. He says he worked two or three lifetimes.

"My mother always worked while taking care of seven kids, until she retired."

George Ow Sr. is now running for the national presidency of the Exchange Club. "He has learned how to speak in public. He has perfected his English," said his son.

In the meantime, the responsibilities for

running the Ow business empire has fallen mostly into the hands of the children.

There is another Ow shopping center in Orland Park, Ill.

The Ows and optometrist Ton Jue developed the Imperial Courts Tennis Club in Aptos.

George Jr.'s brother Terry Ow runs Terry Ow Realty with offices in Capitola and Scotts Valley. George Jr.'s wife, Gail Michaelis-Ow is a broker in the realty firm.

The two Ow daughters, Jeanne and Mary, and their sister-in-law, Judy Ow (the wife of David Ow), run the Village Clothing Company in Kings Village.

The Ows are also partners in the Pizza Company in Capitola and Scotts Valley and the Capitola Book Cafe.

"I'm the number one son. I'm responsible for seeing that the family businesses go well," said George Jr.

George Jr. says his parents consciously spoke English in their household so "we would be comfortable" in an English-speaking country.

"The times have changed so much. I feel I was born in the right time," said the son. "Right now the opportunities are wide open."