



by Geoffrey Dunne

In the spring when the willows and chickens grew fat again and the plum trees blossomed pink and white in the Chinatown yards near the river, the old man with the scruffy beard and tobacco breath sat back in the quiet splendor of the warm April sun and watched with great delight the group of young children playing at his feet.

Far off in the distance, he could hear the children's grandmother, Lee Gue She, turning over the soil of her garden and the San Lorenzo River tumbling gently through the town. He could smell the fish drying on the porches and the herbs from the kitchens and the last, sweet wisps of opium in the air. The world had changed many times in his life, he thought, and it would change many times more after he was gone. ►

Atop the GOLDEN MOUNTAIN

(continued from previous page)

Chin Lai closed his eyes and felt the sun on his face. Another old Chinese man, Ah Fook, hurried by carrying a gunny sack full of fish he had just caught on his daily journey to the wharf. Still another, Moon Lai Bok, carried a load of firewood on his back. The children watched the old men amble along the gravel road as they played.

One of them, 4-year-old George Ow, Jr., climbed up into the comfort of Chin Lai's lap. He always felt safe there, far away from the outside world where his people were still all-too-often called "chinks" and "slant-eyes." The old men always protected him and showered him with love, and he reserved for them the greatest respect and admiration.

Born nearly a century before in the days of the Manchu Dynasty, the old men had left their villages and had come to America — *Gum Shan*, the land of "the Golden Mountain" — in pursuit of wealth and riches; they had found instead poverty and racism. Anti-miscegenation laws prevented them from marrying white women, and immigration restrictions prevented Chinese women from joining them in the States. They had helped build California's railroads and developed the state's fisheries and agriculture, but in return, they were forced to live as aging bachelors on the fringes of white society.

Young George Ow, Jr., didn't know this history as he sat in Chin Lai's lap. What he did know was that the old men were his unofficial uncles who gave him candy and firecrackers and told him funny stories in their native Cantonese dialect. He knew that most of them lived together in the dark, musty Chee Kong Tong temple, with its sticks of incense burning, colorful flags and pictures of Sun Yat-sen, Chiang Kai-shek, and Abraham Lincoln on the walls.

It was the spring of 1947 and Santa Cruz's aging, ramshackle Chinatown was a happy place for a young boy to be growing up. All about him, new life seemed to be singing everywhere.

In less than a decade, however, Chin Lai, Ah Fook and Moon Lai Bok were dead, and the Santa Cruz Chinatown was dead, too. No longer did the plum trees blossom in springtime, nor the chickens grow plump and sassy — and the Ow family moved to Monterey.

"I was born at the right time," said George Ow, Jr., now 43 and living a life far different than those of the old men with whom he shared his youth. "They didn't have the opportunities I've had. It was illegal for them to buy land, and there weren't good paying jobs for them. So in a sense, I feel as though I'm living out their lives, doing the things which they could never do."

Ow, who was born in the old Community Hospital (now the Branciforte Plaza), has lived most his life in the Monterey Bay area, and he feels very much connected to the Chinese men and women who lived their lives in the region before him.

"I feel as though their spirits are all pulling



PHOTO BY GREG PIO

for me whenever I make a decision," he said. "It's like they're here with me all the time, along with my large family, and together they take the weight off the many business decisions I make."

Indeed, that weight must be heavy at times, given the extent of business enterprises with which Ow and his family are involved. Those enterprises include King's Plaza Shopping Center on 41st Avenue and King's Village in Scotts Valley; the Capitola Book Cafe; the Pizza Company I and II; two shopping centers in Chicago; Imperial Courts Tennis Club; and numerous other smaller developments.

Ow and his wife, Gail Michaelis-Ow, are also partners in Greater Santa Cruz Cable Associates, which last month was awarded the city and county's cable contract. All in all, it's a widespread business empire, and the empire, like the family, is growing.

The Ows' latest commercial venture will be at the former location of the Marina Pontiac-Cadillac dealership on the corner of Cathcart and Front streets. There's been a rebirth of business along that section of Front Street, a revival which caught Ow and his partner Larry Chew's attention. "We'd been looking for a place to open up a Pizza Company III for quite a while," Ow said. "When the opportunity presented itself on Front Street, we decided to make the most of it."

In addition to the Pizza Company, the Front Street location will feature The Pontiac Grill, what Ow calls "an '80s concept of a '50s diner," managed by Jilda Loomis of Tortilla Flats and Zanzibar fame. An expanded version of Cymbaline Records will also be located at the new facility. "I think the new development will offer Santa Cruz one of the finest dining-shopping combinations in the area," Ow said. "We're going to bring in some of the finest artists to

decorate the new Pizza Company. Jilda has some fantastic ideas for the Pontiac Grill. And I think that the expanded Cymbaline will be the best record shop around. I feel as though it's a gift, or a tribute, to the people of Santa Cruz."

That the new Front Street complex is only three blocks down the street from the Chinatown of his youth is an irony which is not lost on Ow. "100 years ago, the town leaders were trying to run the Chinese out of Santa Cruz. Now we're a part of the mainstream, coming into town and revitalizing the economy. I think it's wonderful," he concluded. "It feels like a homecoming."

Although there are but a few physical remnants which belie the fact, the Monterey Bay area hosted a number of prosperous Chinatowns during the second half of the 19th century. This history has been dutifully chronicled in Sandy Lydon's landmark work "Chinese Gold," a book which argues that the Chinese contributed significantly to the area (and which, not coincidentally, was published by George Ow, Jr.'s Capitola Book Co.).

Santa Cruz itself had no fewer than four Chinatowns in the late 1800s — the last one (known as Birkenseer's) located at the present site of the Cooper Street Plaza and U.A. Cinema.

During the 1870s and '80s, the Chinese in the West were victimized by a strain of anti-Asian racism, and for nearly a decade in Santa Cruz, the local Chinese community was subjected to virulent efforts to drive its members out of town.

In 1882, the U.S. Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, largely as a result of pressure from California legislators, and all Chinese citizens except merchants were prohibited from

(continued on page 12)

**George Ow Jr.
today, near the
banks of the San
Lorenzo River
where he grew up**

◀ Chin Lai, one of Santa Cruz' Chinatown bachelors, and his nephew George Ow Jr., ready to celebrate with firecrackers

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COVER STORY

(continued from page 11)

entering the United States. The law wasn't repealed until 1943.

It was in the immediate aftermath of racial hostility at the turn of the century that George Ow's grandfather, Lam Pon, came to Santa Cruz. He was allowed to enter the U.S. as a "merchant," according to his oldest daughter Anna Liu, and after serving as a cook in Santa Cruz's Chinatown, he helped establish one of the first apple-drying businesses in the county, an immensely successful operation which later allowed him to open up a restaurant and the first Chinatown bank.

Frustrated by persistent racism, however, and feeling the pull of his homeland, Lam Pon returned periodically to China during the 1920s and left the United States for good in 1931. As the war with Japan threatened China's security, Lam Pon urged his eldest son, George, to seek his fortune in California. George immigrated to the U.S. in 1937 (using his mother's family name, Ow), settled in Santa Cruz, and reconnected with the network of family and friends which had fostered his father.

Although only a teen-ager when he arrived, George Ow, Sr. quickly became a successful businessman, and in 1946 moved to Monterey, where he opened the New Monterey Market near Cannery Row. He moved his family there a few years later. By 1962, the Ow enterprises were ready for further expansion. George Sr., employing a theory that the first major four-way intersection off a freeway interchange was the most valuable, purchased 11 acres at Capitola Road and 41st Avenue. He opened a large, family-run supermarket there, then five years later did the same thing on Mount Hermon Road in Scotts Valley. By 1970, the real estate market on the California coast skyrocketed, and the Ow family empire proceeded to grow steadily.

All the while, the Ow's eldest son, George Jr., was being groomed for a life in business. Chinese custom dictates that the first son be sufficiently educated to handle the rights and privileges of the father, and the Ow family placed a considerable emphasis on education.

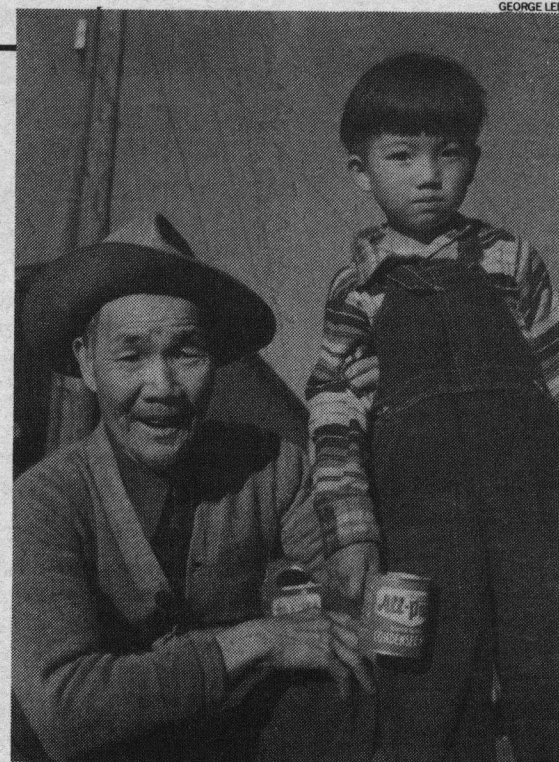
"They said that when they were growing up, not everyone could have an education," said Ow, "so they always looked up to people who were educated, too. All seven of us had the opportunity to go to college."

George Jr.'s first days as a student, however, were difficult ones. He attended the old Laurel School (now the Loudon Nelson Center), where he was taunted by his schoolmates for being Chinese. "At the time, just after the war, Santa Cruz was not very mixed at all," he recalled, the pain of the memory bringing tears to his eyes as he speaks. "I can't remember many kids at school who weren't white, except members of my family. I was young, of course, and maybe that was part of it, but once I stepped out of Chinatown, I felt apart from it all. It was very traumatic. The hurt ... still comes back."

Monterey, to which he moved permanently when he was 8, proved to be a more friendly environment. "The town was more ethnically integrated," Ow said. "I felt more comfortable there, in general, and therefore more comfortable at school."

Never much of a student until he attended Monterey Peninsula College, Ow wound up graduating with honors from San Francisco State in 1965 and receiving his MBA from UCLA the following year.

In 1968, Ow got an education of another sort, this time in the jungles of Vietnam, where he served as an officer with the Army's 101st Airborne Division and ran a medical supply station near Hue in the months following the



Ah Fook, an unofficial uncle who played with and told stories to a young George Ow Jr.

Tet Offensive.

It was his first time in Asia, and though racist remarks were commonplace when referring to the enemy, Ow felt completely at ease with his fellow soldiers. "I was very much a part of my unit," he said. "In their eyes, I wasn't anything but American. I was very proud to serve my country as an officer. My father had served during World War II, and I felt a continuity there. But just like everyone else in Vietnam, I could hardly wait to get home." (Ironically, his grandfather Lam Pon, whom he had never seen and who never returned to the U.S. after his bitter departure, had died at the age of 92 earlier in the year only 400 miles north in the People's Republic of China. It was the closest Ow ever came to him.)

After his stint in the Army, Ow returned to Santa Cruz, where his father passed on to him the primary responsibilities of running the family enterprise. He was 27 years old.

"I always knew that I was going to work with my family," Ow acknowledged. "As the number one son, I was groomed to take over the family business. My father always said I was born under a lucky star. He trusted my judgment and respected my intuition. I was closing up the Monterey market and handling the money when I was in the eighth grade.

"I've been very fortunate," he continued, "in that my father and grandfather provided me with a base on which I've been able to build. Lam Pon established a network for my father, and he in turn acquired a great deal of developable property. Both passed on their extensive knowledge of business. I'm very appreciative of that, and I feel the responsibility of expanding the base for my extended family and those who come after me."

Ow most certainly has done that. He negotiated long-term leases with the likes of Alpha Beta, Orchard Supply, Thrifty Drugs, World Savings and the U.A. Theaters, leases which have assured the success of the two King's shopping centers. He has supported several of his younger siblings in establishing businesses of their own and works closely with brothers Terry and David and neice Karen in overseeing the King's shopping areas.

"My mind is always open to new ideas," Ow said. "I learned from my father that the key to being a good businessman is trusting your own intuition, of being open to possibilities. For me, business is very exciting. There really is an

(continued on page 14)

COVER STORY

GEORGE Ow, Jr. has had primary responsibility for Ow family-owned businesses (most started by his father) in Santa Cruz County since 1970. That has included managing the following:

- Kings Plaza shopping center on 41st Avenue
- Kings Village shopping center in Scotts Valley
- Pizza Company restaurants (in Capitola, Scotts Valley, and soon to be on Front Street)
- Soon-to-open Pontiac Bar and Grill on Front Street
- Capitola Book Cafe
- Office complex at 1700 Mission St.
- Imperial Courts tennis club, Aptos
- Housing development next to tennis club

Ow is also heavily involved in Cabrillo scholarships, including:

- Twenty \$500 "American Dream" scholarships given last year to minority students, usually kids who are the first in their family to attend college
- Eight \$500 "Women's Unlimited" scholarships given to women re-entering college (Cabrillo)
- Sponsorship of two students, formerly Mexican migrant farm workers, at UCSC

Ow is also involved in the local arts scene, but more on an individual level than a community-wide one, preferring to sponsor individual fledgling artists rather than writing checks to arts associations. Art projects Ow has sponsored include the famous cow and whale murals on 38th Avenue and two films by Geoffrey Dunn and Mark Schwartz. •

(continued from page 12)

open market here in town. A business can be a hit one day, then down the next. Flexibility is the key to success. You have to dance lightly."

Don't think Ow is all business, however. Personally friendly and gracious almost to a fault, Ow has emerged as one of the most important supporters of both the arts and scholarship funds in the Santa Cruz community. At a time when "Reaganomics" has cut significantly into public coffers for cultural activities and education, Ow has opened up his own pockets to help artists and aspiring students in need.

One night in 1979, Ow was driving down Mission Street with his eldest son, William. Near the juncture of King and High streets he spotted someone painting a whale mural on the side of a building. "I was completely engrossed in business at the time," Ow said, "and here was this young guy painting at night with his headlights pointed at the wall. It was remarkable. It touched me. I could see how great it was to have an artistic vision that you could live for. I thought this must have been what Mozart was like - to be connected with the infinite."

The artist was Daniel Burgevin, and Ow soon commissioned him to complete a mural at his 41st Avenue complex. "It struck me that with just a little money and some wall space, there could be a great work of art. There is so much latent in Santa Cruz that only needs a little support to make it blossom. I see myself as a conduit."

Since the first mural seven years ago, Ow has supported a series of dance, drama, film, mural, sculpting and writing projects — everything from Shakespeare Santa Cruz to films for Planned Parenthood — in addition to publishing Lydon's "Chinese Gold."

The Capitola Book Cafe, which he owns

with a handful of other investors, has sponsored numerous readings and book-signings, events which Santa Cruz novelist James D. Houston called "significant contributions to the vitality of the cultural community. George has become a real important figure here. He's high-minded, a real vital presence."

Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston, who wrote "Farewell to Manzanar" with her husband, said she feels "empowered" by her friendship with Ow.

"George's sense of community and creativity reflects my own notion of Asian sensibilities," she explained. "He has a deep feeling of interdependence, of understanding that his own destiny is linked to those around him. He has a unique way of looking at purpose and of encouraging creativity because his own *yin* and *yang* energies are in balance. He's been strongly influenced by the Chinese philosophy handed down by his father: you're only as successful as the rest of your community."

You're also only as successful as your family, according to Chinese tradition, and as Ow moves comfortably into his 40s, he has refocused his energies on his immediate clan.

"Probably my biggest challenge at the present time is to learn more about my family, about being a good husband and father," says Ow, who has three sons — William, Benjamin and Andrew. "My wife, Gail, is my teacher in this respect. She's great with the kids, and I feel I have a lot to learn from her. I feel very lucky to have her as a partner."

"Because of the various laws aimed at the Chinese, the old Chinese men I grew up with were never able to have wives or children. How lucky I am to be blessed with such a large family. Sometimes I think it must have been very lonely for them," he paused, as though saddened by the thought. "Yes, very lonely."

Today, there are 13 Ow grandchildren, all of them living in the Santa Cruz area. "I think that the spirits of Chin Lai and Ah Fook and maybe even Lam Pon are coming back to life again in the new generation," Ow declared. "I have a feeling that they are all here with us today. It's a much better time for them to be living." •

Geoffrey Dunn is a local free-lance writer and film-maker, presently filming "Miss or Myth?," the story of the Miss California Pageant. Dunn and partner Mark Schwartz have produced two other documentaries, with George Ow as executive producer.

Ow Photos, Celebration

PHOTOS of George Ow, Jr. and the community he knew as a child will be on display at the Octagon Museum Friday through Nov. 20. An evening celebration, including a traditional Chinese lion dance and a blessing of the exhibit, begins at 5:30 p.m., followed by an 8 p.m. reception.

Letters, documents and more than 150 photos chronicle the Chinese experience in the region since the mid 1800s. Other items include costumes, work clothes, cooking utensils, tools, pipes, games and objects used in celebrations and religious ceremonies.

Historian Sandy Lydon helped the Santa Cruz City Museum prepare the display, which, like Lydon's book, "Chinese Gold," shows why the Chinese came here and outlines their successes in fishing, agriculture, railroads and business.

Lydon lectures on "The History of the Santa Cruz Chinatown" at 7 p.m. Tuesday in the Veteran's Memorial Building, 842 Front St. With her will be author Judy Yung, who will talk about the role of women in the Chinese community. For more information, phone 425-2540.