

Bicentennial bow

Dancing lion will honor town's Chinese legacy

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FOR CENTURIES, the Chinese lion dance has symbolized happiness and good fortune.

Performers of the dance leap in the air, twist, and do martial arts movements to the pounding sound of drums, while carrying an ornate lion's head. It is said that the dance dispels evil spirits and ensures prosperity.

Saturday, the Wushu Troupe from San Francisco will bring a little of that tradition to downtown Santa Cruz during the city's Bicentennial Parade.

It will be one of 127 entrants in the parade celebrating the city's 200-year history.

Marching bands, equestrians, historic reenactments, the Wells Fargo stagecoach and folkloric dancers are among entrants in the two-hour parade.

The Wushu troupe's appearance marks the contribution of the Chinese community to Santa Cruz, said Dorothy Franks, parade coordinator.

Earlier Mission Fiesta parades have emphasized the Hispanic heritage, said Franks. "My feeling was to make the bicentennial more multi-cultural since many other cultures contributed to the history of the area."

The Chinese came to the Monterey Bay Area in the Gold Rush years and established a Chinatown in 1870 along Front Street.

About 200 people lived there — most working as laborers, cooks, waiters and launderers — and were persecuted by the white townspeople during that time. A fire destroyed Chinatown and, the community moved, but by the '40s, Chinatown's population had dwindled to about 50 people.

Bryant Fong, head of the Wushu Troupe, said there was a good chance the lion dance was performed at some point in Chinatown here, since it is traditionally used to celebrate happy occasions like the opening of a new business or the New Year.

The dance had its origins centuries ago.

"In ancient times it was said there was a creature that was bothering a small village," said Fong, founder of the troupe and a Chinese martial arts instructor at UC Berkeley.

"The creature, a lion, was eating all the vegetables and the vil-

lagers wanted to drive it away."

But since the lion was not killing anything, they didn't want to kill the creature. "They figured he had to be sort of godly," said Fong.

"The story has it that they made a papier mache creature that looked like the lion and got firecrackers, gongs and drums to drive it away."

The lion fled, and since that

time, the lion dance has been used to celebrate auspicious occasions. It is often seen as a symbol of the Chinese people, expressing their hope for prosperity, good luck and wisdom.

In fact, just about everything from Chinese New Year's to the opening of a new business is celebrated with a lion dance, said Fong.



Wushu Troupe will bring lion from San Francisco.

Since lions are not native to China, it is a mythological beast that is portrayed by individual crafts people and no two are alike. Each has its own story, usually signified by its color.

The troupe's lion is silver and was made in Hong Kong. "The Chinese word for money is silver, so this is a good fortune lion," said Fong. "It is very good luck to have a silver lion."

The lion dance is only part of the troupe's repertoire. It is primarily a martial arts group, practicing Wushu.

Traditional Wushu is used for fighting. It is a Chinese martial arts form that involves kicks, punches and acrobatics.

But the troupe also practices modern Wushu which is primarily used as a sport. It is judged on "perfection of form, grace, beauty and quickness," said Fong.

Members of the troupe will be giving Wushu demonstrations as they walk the parade route. Some of its members are headed for the first world Wushu championship in China this month, said Fong.

The parade is scheduled to start on Cedar Street at Cathcart Street at 10:30 a.m., and travel up Cedar to Mission Street, past the Town Clock to Water Street and then on to the County Center.

Its entrants include Tandy Beal & Company dance troupe, the Wells Fargo stagecoach and seven school marching bands.

Docents from the Santa Cruz Mission will bring a carreta, a 14-foot wagon, and stage a festival celebration as it would have taken place during mission times, said Franks.

Shadows of the Past, a historical re-enactment group, will show off 200 years of Santa Cruz history and the Santa Cruz Cycling Club will ride antique bicycles, including an 1886 Victor Light with a 56-inch wheel.

Among the musical offerings will be the Long Marine Lab docents who will play selections on the brown bull kelp that floats in the bay, and the Watsonville Band, said Franks.

Three sets of grandstand seats will be set up on Cedar Street. The review stand will be across from the Town Clock and the dignitaries' review stand will be in front of the County Center.