

# Santa Cruz Yesterdays

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**LAST LOCAL CHINATOWN—(BIRKENSEER'S)** (From the Preston Sawyer Collection)

The great fire of 1894, which took the court house, burned north from Cooper street and jumped Front to the row of old buildings which housed Santa Cruz' oriental population, with their stores and wash houses, set the stage for the creation of the Birkenseer Chinatown.

It was the third, perhaps the fourth, but at any rate the final of the city's Chinatowns. First had been a row of one story shacks on the west side of Pacific avenue between Walnut and Lincoln. In the late seventies this had moved to the east side of Front street above Cooper where a number of buildings, relics of the first business district in Santa Cruz, could be had for low rents.

## Two Colonies

The 1894 fire led to two Chinatowns. Mrs. Harriet Blackburn built for the orientals two rows of wooden buildings, some of them two stories high, south of the end of West Sycamore street.

At the same time George Bir-

kenseer, enterprising German, induced part of the Chinese to move into his buildings on Bellevue Place, an offshoot of Cooper street near the river.

The joss house, which had moved to the Blackburn Chinatown, was taken to Birkenseer's and in 1905 he bought some of Mrs. Blackburn's buildings and moved them to his row of wooden structures on Bellevue Place.

George Birkenseer, who became a billposter, had made an earlier career of shoe shining. Coming to Santa Cruz in 1878, when 28 years old, he established an ornate bootblack stand, then hired a man to run it while he attended the public school in classes with boys and girls less than half his age, while gaining mastery of the English language.

## At Paris Exposition

In late 1888 Birkenseer left on a visit to Germany and to the 1889 Paris exposition, where he showed the Parisians and their visitors how shoes should be shined. Back in Santa Cruz later in 1889 he reopened his business with a transparency—"George the Champion"—and other advertising features. It was on Pacific avenue not far from the Pacific Ocean House.

Competition had grown during his absence and he cut the price of shines to five cents on weekdays, 10 cents on Sundays and holidays. Prosperous days enabled him to later buy the land leading to and along the river bank which later became his Chinatown, just south of the Garibaldi Hotel. A number of old buildings were moved there when they were replaced along Pacific avenue and Front street.

Birkenseer, with Bob Christy, at-

tempted a variety show house on upper Pacific avenue which was raided and smashed by a group said to have objected to girls serving drinks to patrons, and to the upstairs rooms where it was alleged drunks were robbed.

## Only Part Remains

The picture shows about half of the Chinatown, looking toward the San Lorenzo, as it appeared 20 years ago. Of all the buildings seen, only one remains today. The stores of Wo Gap and On Gouen Lung have long since vanished. Old Gee Kong Tong joss house, facing the river to the left at end of the street, was torn down earlier this year.

To the right of the street's end, also facing the river, was for years the Birkenseer home. Here his large family grew up. After their mother died George later remarried. His last years were spent in the home they built, still standing, at the foot of Cooper street. Birkenseer died at 82 while visiting a daughter in Oakland, on April 23, 1936.