

Chinese American Community



The Chinese In Santa Cruz— Living On The Golden Mountain

by Virginia Lee

Chinatown, Santa Cruz c. 1920. Known as Birkenseer's Chinatown, it was the last of Santa Cruz's five Chinatowns. Photo taken looking east toward San Lorenzo River. Site of U.A. Theaters today. Last resident moved after 1955 flood.

Photo courtesy UCSC Special Collections.



Quong Chong with his two sons. Quong Chong was a prominent merchant in Santa Cruz's Chinatown in the 1880's and 1890's. Photo courtesy of Roy Christian

Recently, more and more information has surfaced regarding the role of the Chinese immigrants in the early days of Santa Cruz County. As with any cultural phenomenon, it is often interpreted in exaggerated ways, giving the Chinese community a reputation for being mystical, exotic, sometimes passive and sometimes violent, and, in general, 'different.'

Based on this mythology, a whole way of thinking evolved about the

Chinese which ran them out of town, and resulted in the eventual demise of the Chinese community in Santa Cruz. Some of those misconceptions still exist today.

Sandy Lydon, perhaps the foremost authority on the history of Santa Cruz County, is determined to debunk many of the myths about the Chinese.

An instructor at Cabrillo College, Lydon is currently working on a book about the Chinese in Santa Cruz from 1850 to the present. Entitled *Visions of*

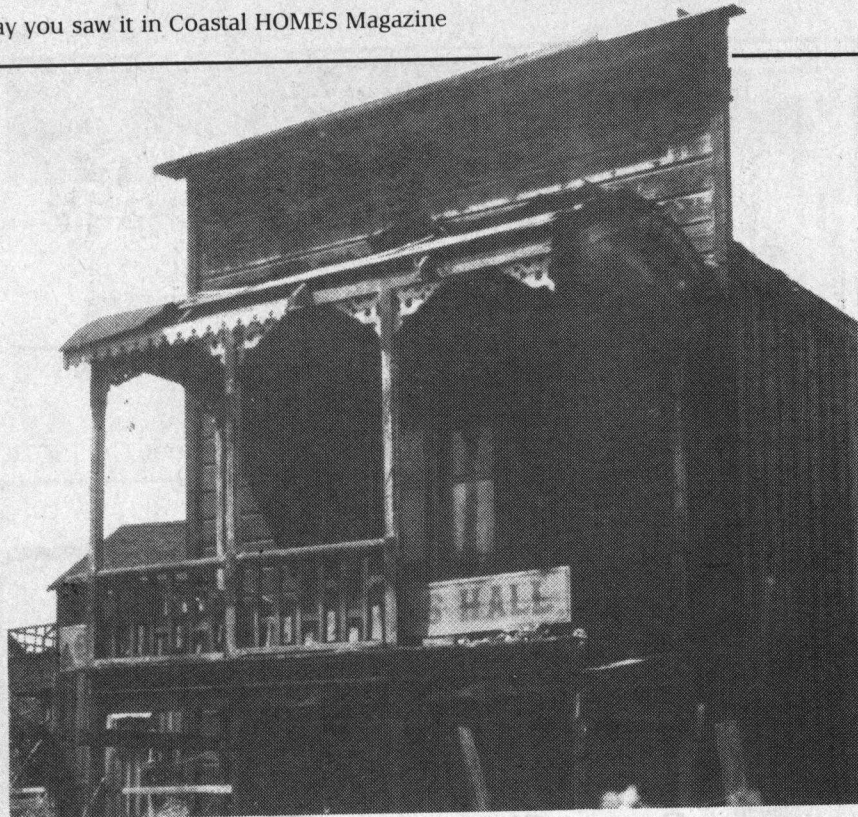


Gold, the book is due to be published locally in the fall of 1984. Lydon blasts the common stereotyped image of the Chinese saying, "People think that Chinese are all mystical philosophers with no regard for human life. They think that all Chinese speak in epigrams and do Kung-Fu. It's ridiculous. They're just ordinary people like you and me."

The first myth that Lydon points the finger at is the idea that the Chinese come from 'the East.' "The geographical reference to the 'Far East' is a colonial anachronism held over from the days of the British Empire, when the presumption was that Greenwich was the center of the world," says Lydon. In fact, China lies to the west of California, and it is more logical for the Chinese to think of us as 'the East.'

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A Joss House In Santa Cruz

The Chinese survived with their stoic passivity, as well as a sense of humor, as demonstrated by the wonderful story associated with the above photograph. What you see in the picture is an old Chinese temple and meeting hall for the 'Chee Kong Tong,' a revolutionary organization that was committed to overthrowing the corrupt Manchu government which had controlled mainland China since 1664, wherever the Chinese migrated, chapters of this group sprang up to keep the pro-Chinese nationalist fervor alive.

Because of its politically subversive nature, the Chee Kong Tong were a secret society, with initiation rituals that were performed on the lunar New Year. There were religious overtones too, with taoist images and an altar upstairs to their deity, 'Kuang Kung,' a god of literature.

Apparently, during one of the initiation ceremonies in the meeting hall downstairs, a group of local folks were strolling along the banks of the San Lorenzo River (where the temple was located), and they happened to take a peek inside the door. When they saw what was going on, the group of whites, who coincidentally belonged to the Masonic Order, decided that what they had witnessed was definitely 'masonic' in nature. They further surmised that

this group must be a long lost brotherhood of Masons, and hastened to inform the American Masonic Order of their discovery. The Masons then officially conferred the title of "Chinese Freemasons" on the Che Kong Tong, who then put up a sign on their building which read "Chinese Freemasons Hall" (part of which is visible in the photograph).

The Chinese shrugged their shoulders, thinking that this was a wonderful idea. With such an endorsement, they realized that they would be immune to the persecution being suffered by the rest of the Chinese community in Santa Cruz. They were legitimized and protected. Some of them even wore Masonic pins around town.

In 1911, the Manchu government in China was thrown out, and the original reason for the creation of the Chee Kong Tong ceased to exist. Soon after, the temple was abandoned.

In the 1940's, it suffered flood damage along the San Lorenzo River and was finally dismantled in 1950 by the George Lee family, who owned the property. George Lee himself took this picture of the temple shortly before it was taken down. Another name for this temple was a "joss" house—"joss" being a corruption of the Portuguese word "deus," the name for God.

According to Sandy Lydon, Chinese mariners knew of the existence of California before the Europeans even thought of the world as round. As early as the 5th century A.D., the Chinese visited up and down the west coast of the Americas, traces of which have shown up in the language and symbolism of an Indian tribe in Mexico. There is also evidence that the Chinese visited Acapulco in the 16th and 17th centuries, after the Spanish conquest of Mexico. Lydon illuminates further, "It was natural for the Chinese to migrate to the furthest shore of the Pacific basin, in fact more natural than for the Europeans to be here. China is closer to California than England."

The Chinese who first came to California in the 1850's referred to California as "the golden mountain." As for all waves of immigrants, whether from Ireland, Italy or China, America was a land of opportunity, a chance for a better life. Lydon vehemently refutes the term "coolie," a derogative expression derived from a Cantonese word meaning "slave labor." Lydon insists, "The Chinese came here of their own free will, often on a 'credit ticket,' which they paid for themselves." When the Chinese who came to the Santa Cruz area in the 1860's found no gold, they went to work building the railroads, developing the agricultural industry in the Pajaro Valley, and fishing in the Monterey Bay. They were simple, hard-working folk who gave a lot in exchange for the less-than-friendly reception they received from California 'natives.' Later, they served as a labor pool for the domestic chores of the tourist industry, doing jobs white folks thought were beneath them; they ran the Chinese laundries, served as houseboys and cooked a lot of Chinese food. "Most of those who view the settlement of America have a British outlook, thinking of the Chinese as some exotic frill. In truth, they were rather ordinary folks who built all the railroads in the county, including 100 miles of track laid, grades cut, and 2½ miles of tunnels punched," Lydon concludes with a matter-of-factness not to be argued with. Indeed, such accomplishments are a testament to the hard work of a community famed for its alleged gambling, opium-smoking, mysterious and esoteric ways. "People have projected this image on Chinese immigrants to this day," says Lydon. "And the reason

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is because the Chinese look different than we do."

Another myth about the Chinese which irks Sandy Lydon's Irish ire is that they are 'mysterious.' "There seems to be a notion that wherever the Chinese live, there are underground tunnels, catacombs, etc." The tunnels referred to were probably built for the railroad, although he does acknowledge the existence of underground catacombs in San Francisco's Chinatown of the 1930's. Lydon goes on to deny the myth of the mysteriously violent Chinese hatchet murders as "cockamamie," revealing that the Chinese themselves thought of the rest of the world as 'barbarian.' It is in their timeless cultural patience that the Chinese wait for the rest of the world to evolve to the level of maturity in their civilization. This patient ability to wait is often mistaken for passivity, if not cowardice.

I asked Sandy Lydon specifics about the Chinese settlements in Santa Cruz County. There was a Chinese community in what is now downtown Santa Cruz, which occupied the Front Street area along the San Lorenzo River. According to Lydon, there were no Chinese gold mines in Soquel (contrary to some rumors), and he also says that 'China Camp' in the Forest of Nisene Marks is a misnomer. "The Chinese were there (in The Forest of Nisene Marks) as railroad workers, but that was 40 years before the camp was there." The Chinese also built railroads in the San Lorenzo Valley. Chinatowns existed both in Salinas and Watsonville, and Chinese fishermen lived in Monterey, Capitola (where New Brighton Beach is now) and further to the north of Davenport.

Sadly enough, the Chinese were not appreciated by the local population in spite of all their contributions. In fact, a racist campaign was waged in the 1870's and 1880's to chase the Chinese out of Santa Cruz. A local anti-Chinese club even succeeded in getting a city ordinance passed in 1880 forbidding persons to carry bags attached to poles on the public sidewalks, obviously aimed at the Chinese laundry deliveries. The Chinese were blamed for the economic depression of 1876 and unemployment in 1877, due to their cheap labor force. But, in truth, the Chinese were not really competing for American jobs, because most Americans refused to do the menial tasks the Chinese

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were doing, for practically nothing. The Chinese were even blamed for a lack of fish in the Monterey Bay, an accusation often levied at the Vietnamese fishermen at Moss Landing today.

When asked what eventually happened to the Chinese community in Santa Cruz, Sandy Lydon gave the following explanation.

Most of the original wave of Chinese immigrants in the 1850's and 1860's were men who came without their families. After the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was passed by the United States government, no families were allowed into the country even if the husband and father had been living and working here for 20 years. So, the Chinese community, excepting a small number of well-established families, was a 'bachelor society.'

The Chinese men were not interested in marrying American women, and knew they could never become naturalized citizens. After a time, many died or went back to China.

After 1882, those who returned to China were not allowed back into the United States. Quite a few of the Chinese families in Santa Cruz moved up to San Francisco. In 1930, the Chinatown in Watsonville burned, although the one in Salinas has survived.

Wander up to the Evergreen cemetery behind Harvey West Park in Santa Cruz, and look for the tombstones with Chinese characters on them. They are dated circa 1900.

By 1930, only six or seven Chinese families were left in Santa Cruz. Those who did remain have elevated their status in white society through their pursuit of higher education. Second and third generation Chinese went on to become astute professionals or successful entrepreneurs.

A hundred years later, these Chinese descendants have become a part of the socio-political system which discriminated against their ancestors for so long.

It is natural to think of California as the western frontier of the Western world. But to many it was regarded as the eastern frontier to the Orient. Nonetheless, let's hope that the California coast will continue to be a place where these two cultures can meet, and benefit from one another. ■

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