

Chinese American Community

Chinese found gold in California dust

By DON MILLER
Sentinel Staff Writer

SO WHAT'S NEW? In a nation of immigrants — who historically have had a tough time making sure those who follow get to wipe their feet on the welcome mat — to find evidence of shameful treatment toward a race or nationality should not come as any great shock.

What is surprising after reading Cabrillo College historian Sandy Lydon's new book "Chinese Gold" (Capitola Book Co., \$18.95) is how complete the whitewash of the past 120 years had been.

Surprising, because the discovery

of "gold" always seems to whet human interest. The bottom line usually knows no borders.

Lydon's Chinese gold, however, needs a bit more refining and smelting before it shines.

The Chinese immigrants, he writes, called America the Golden Mountain, and images of golden splendor fueled their journey across the ocean to a strange continent.

And the gold they found? Leftovers, the fish heads, apples, swamps and laundries left in the cracks of an increasingly industrialized society. Neither coolies nor transient sojourners, the Chinese, Lydon asserts, were integral to the local development of agriculture, railroad construction, fishing, food processing and manufacturing.

Through their particular form of alchemy (insight plus ingenuity plus energy), the Chinese turned what they found into gold, to the lasting benefit of the Monterey Bay region.

CHINESE gold was mined despite hostility toward the miners. Even worse, the visibility of the Chinese emigrants was beclouded by legislative action — most prominently the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which limited further immigration and denied them citizenship until it was rescinded in 1943.

That law caused faces and names to blur in historical records, as the immigrants sought anonymity from the hounds of persecution. Lydon lyrically portrays the corporeal manifestation of an invisible people:

Though the Chinese are not explicitly mentioned in the local and regional histories, if you hold each page to the light you can make out a faint pattern. The longer you look, the stronger the pattern becomes. The Chinese are in the very paper, they are the watermark. The rhythm of the car's tires crossing the railroad tracks will beat out "Chi-na-man," ...

A look at the Chinese contributions to the development of the Monterey Bay area, well-documented by Lydon in the 550-page book, reveals the Chinese soul, and the flesh-and-blood cost, of:

- The sugar beet industry — It was built on the backs of Chinese workers and it led to an agricultural revolution in the Salinas and Pajaro valleys. The development of the strawberry industry around Watsonville was spurred by the work done by Chinese contractors.

- Agricultural diversification in the Pajaro Valley — Chinese farm laborers provided the muscle and ingenuity to make this possible.

- Fruit drying — The Chinese helped pioneer this industry, which meant the difference between profits and losses on the apple crop.

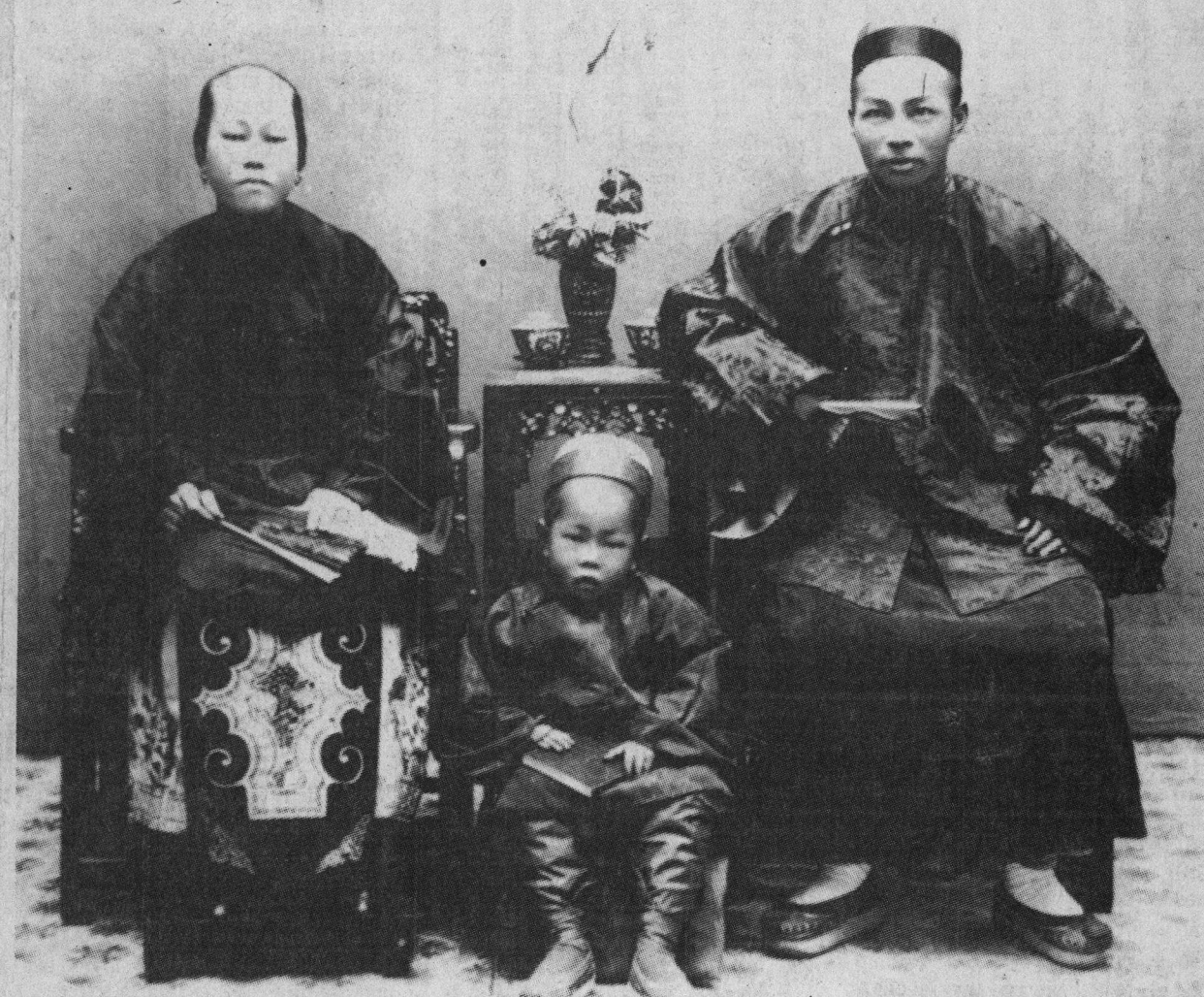
- The reclaiming of swamps — Thousands of acres of tule swamp in the Salinas Valley were put into farm production by the Chinese.

- Santa Cruz becoming a resort town — In large part, this occurred because Chinese laborers made the cuts, drilled the tunnels and laid the rails bringing trainloads of tourists into Santa Cruz and Monterey counties.

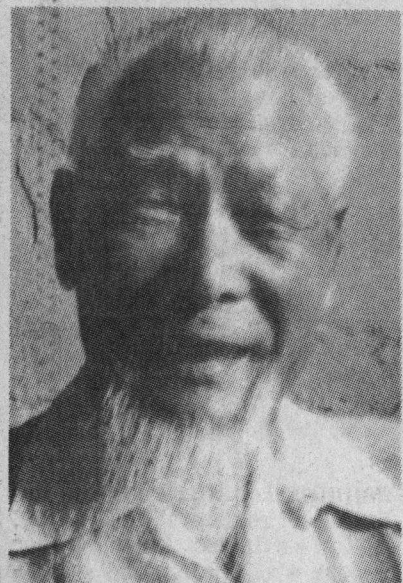
- The commercial fishing industry in Monterey — It was founded by Chinese fishermen.

- Chinese laundries — At one point, nine of 10 buildings along Front Street, Santa Cruz Chinatown of the 1870s, were laundries. Rather than being some sort of inherent Chinese custom, these were further evidence of the Chinese eye for gold. Laundries required little capital investment and lots of manual labor — and no one else was washing and pressing clothes.

The Chinese came from an ancient land where flood, drought and fam-



Chinese Christian community leader Pon Fang, wife, and son, Samuel, c.1890.



Hoy Lew of Watsonville

ine were familiar terrors. The search for food, always scarce, was a legacy of the old country experience. When they got to California, the Chinese, with eyes sharpened by the harsh necessities of the life they'd left, saw opportunity everywhere.

They fished for the then-scorned abalone and squid, harvested and dried kelp, dried the fish they caught in the open air. The Chinese transformed wild mustard into agricultural gold, sold on the East Coast and in Europe.

In Santa Cruz County, anti-Chinese

sentiment crested in the 1870s and '80s. Watsonville resisted the trend, perhaps because the loss of Chinese labor would have meant economic ruin. In Santa Cruz proper, where Chinatowns sprang up and eventually disappeared on Pacific Avenue (1860-72), Front Street (1872-94), at the end of Cooper Street (1905-55) and Chestnut Street (1894-1905), the discrimination was not nearly so benign.

The Sentinel, and its owner-editor Duncan McPherson, was the loudest local voice decrying the Chinese presence. In fact, Santa Cruz, which

boasted several racist lobbying groups such as the Order of Caucasians and the Workingman's Party, became one of the leading edges of the tide of anti-Chinese discrimination in the state.

Eventually, through discrimination, because of a dearth of females through an exodus to bigger cities such as San Francisco, the Chinese population in the Monterey Bay area dwindled. From a high of 6.5 percent in 1890, it is today but one-half of 1 percent of the population of

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Parade in Watsonville, July 1898 — Mansion House Hotel, still standing, background.

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Monterey and Santa Cruz counties.

The Point Alones fishing village, on the border between Pacific Grove and Monterey, was largely destroyed by fire in 1906. The last flourishing Chinatown, in Brooklyn (now Pajaro), was decimated by fire in 1924.

Still, gold dust glimmered in the ashes.

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SANDY LYDON can't help himself. Always the teacher, animated, instructing, gesturing, *And h-e-r-e's Sandy*, Lydon's enthusiasm for his subject is infectious. After all, he began research in 1969. Started writing in 1981. Got a National Endowment and sabbatical leave from Cabrillo to finish.

"I had to go back and reconstruct the history of the entire region," Lydon says. "I had to give the Chinese a frame of reference."

There are Universal Messages to be gleaned, theorems to be postulated.

"My terror was that my interviewees would die — a number were

in their 80s and 90s," he says. "But only two died. This is their (Chinese immigrants') story. I'm the go-between."

Lydon recounts a recent book signing, attended by Hoy Lew, the aged "patriarch of the Watsonville Chinese community," whose experiences on the Golden Mountain are recounted in the book. Lydon introduced Lew at the signing, and soon people were asking the old man to autograph his photograph (page 463). He did — in Chinese.

"That moment and the next two hours made up for all the 16 years of work," Lydon says. "That's why you do these things."

These things will continue. "I'm now working on the Japanese — the second wave of Asian immigration.

"Then the Filipinos." Lydon stops for breath, and adds that after that, he'll deal with post-World War II Asian immigration — from Korea, Thailand and Indochina.

"So," he gesticulates, "this is a continuous story. There are striking parallels between the treatment of Chinese fishermen in the 19th century and the treatment of Viet-

namese fishermen in the late 1970s."

The discussion turns to discrimination. Lydon says truly understanding the experience of Mexican farm laborers comes from knowing history. "The Chinese were litmus tests of the 19th century for tolerance. Hispanics are tests for the 20th century in this region," Lydon instructs. "Or the people on the Pacific Garden Mall. The Chinese brought morality issues, too — prostitution, opium dens — and they dressed funny, spoke a different language and wore their hair long.

"We can be very hard on people who are different." Lydon is puzzled by Duncan McPherson's role in the persecution of the Chinese. "I spent a lot of time trying to figure out, 'Why?' The McPherson family was extremely helpful but he's an enigma. On some issues he was extremely progressive. He supported women's suffrage. Voting rights for blacks. But every time the Chinese came up, it would set him off."

He admits Chinese were treated "terribly all over the world. They

'The only way to recognize the sickness of discrimination is to see it in yourself.'

— Sandy Lydon

still are — everybody has the sickness of racism and discrimination. I think it's part of the human genetic make-up. For instance, the Chinese in China now have the tendency to be quite discriminatory against their own minority people. It's horrendous what the Japanese have done to the Koreans ..."

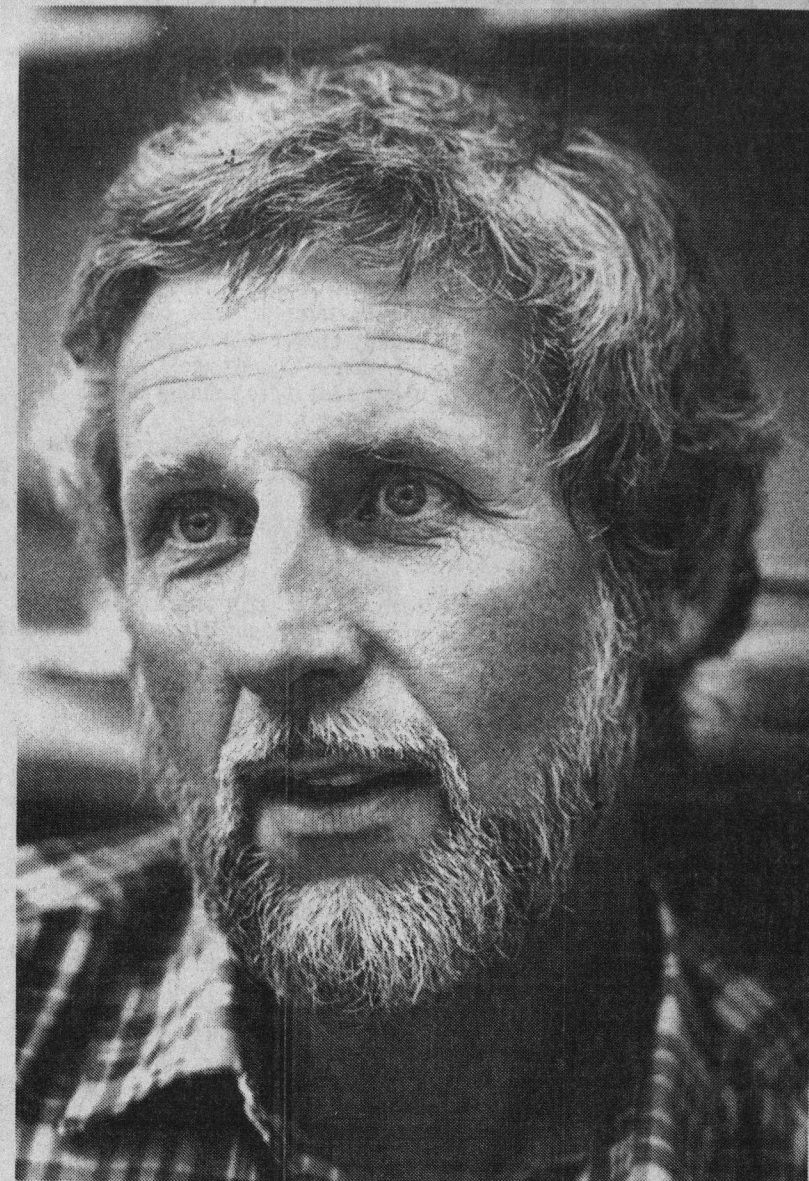
Then why write about yet another case of discrimination? "This country was supposed to be different. We need to work hard — and we have in the last two decades — to counter that natural tendency. The only way to recognize the sickness is to see it in yourself."

WHO, Lydon is asked, is going to read a 550-page history book, about people as heretofore locally obscure and inscrutable as the Chinese? "You always wonder that," he replies. "You tell the story as you think it happened, even though there are some parts that are not very pleasant."

Lydon says he and the book's designers worked to make it digestible, modern, "gorgeous." Footnotes were placed at the conclusion, by page, subject and quotation so not to scare readers away with their somewhat dusty scholarly air.

The book is the first publication — with a first printing of 8,000 — by Capitola Book Co., owned by second-generation Chinese George Ow Jr., whose father, George Sr., figures in "Chinese Gold" as an example of a success story. George Sr. came to Santa Cruz County in 1936 with \$16 in his pocket, unable to speak any English.

He would later develop shopping



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Sandy Lydon spent 16 years mining 'Chinese Gold.'

centers on 41st Avenue and in Scotts Valley.

Lydon says George Sr. had already been interviewed when George Jr. approached him about publishing the book.

"The point is, George Ow Sr. saw — the immigrants see things we don't see, bring energy we don't have. Ever wonder why the Koreans have taken over the convenience-store industry? The necessity that

drove them here ... they can see where the opportunities are."

Lydon pauses, the teacher in love with his subject. Parallels, lessons to be learned, conclusions to be reached. "You shut off immigration, you shut off the entrepreneurial spirit," Lydon says with fervor. "Every one of these people I talked to — and the second and third generations — still said, 'America is the land of opportunity.'"