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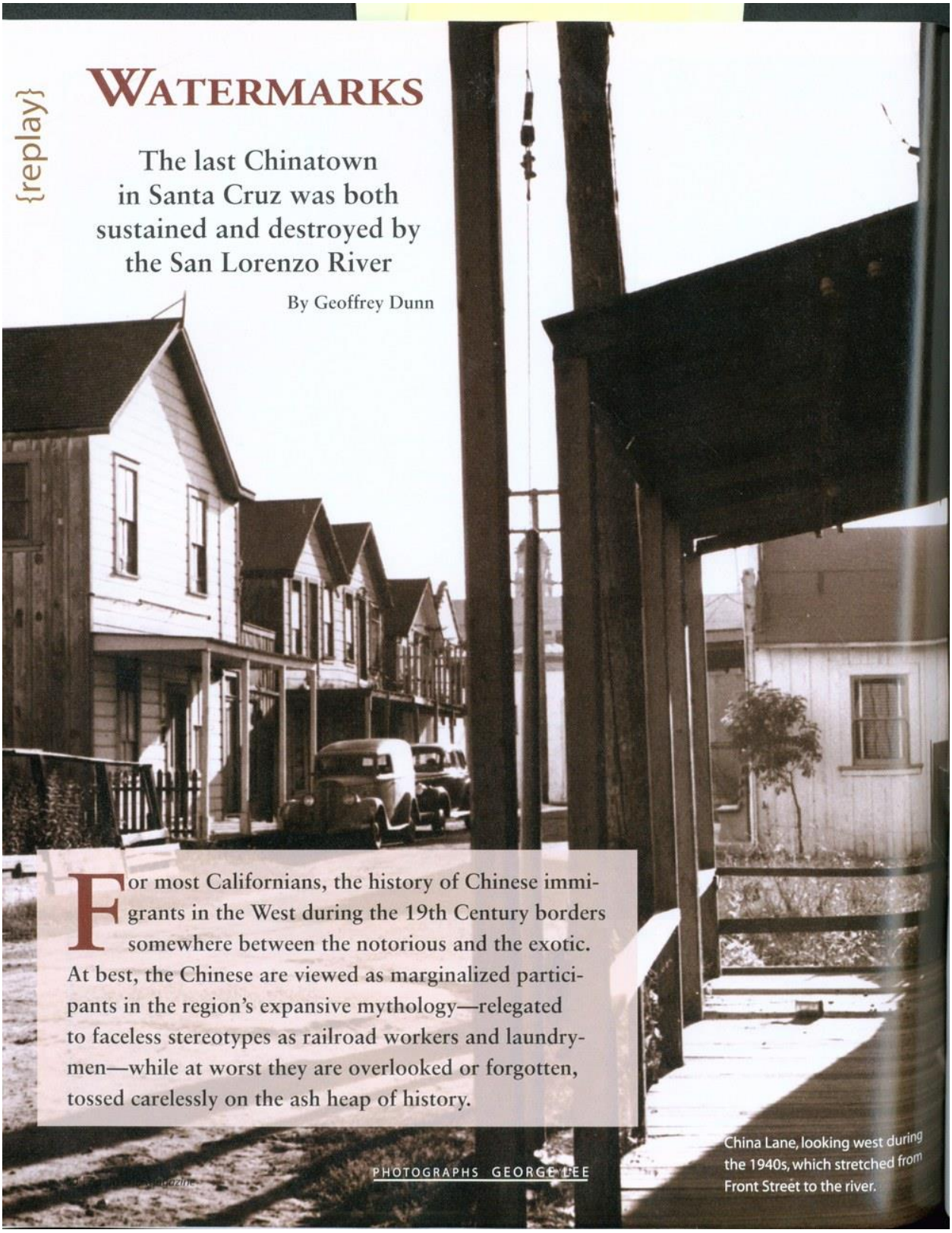
WATERMARKS

The last Chinatown in Santa Cruz was both sustained and destroyed by the San Lorenzo River

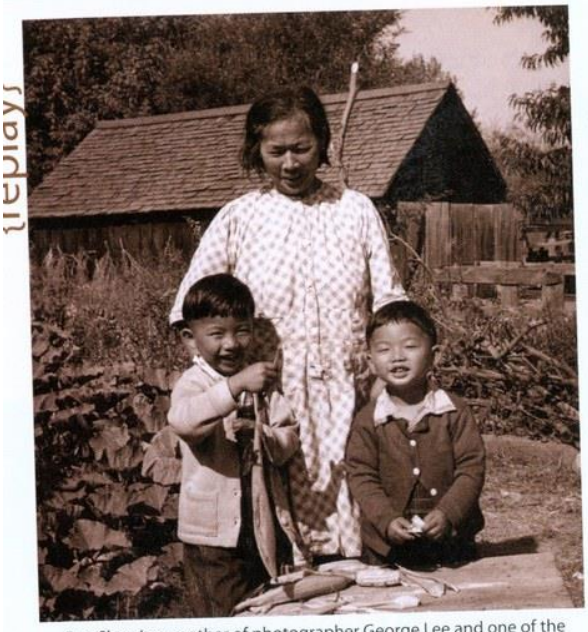
By Geoffrey Dunn



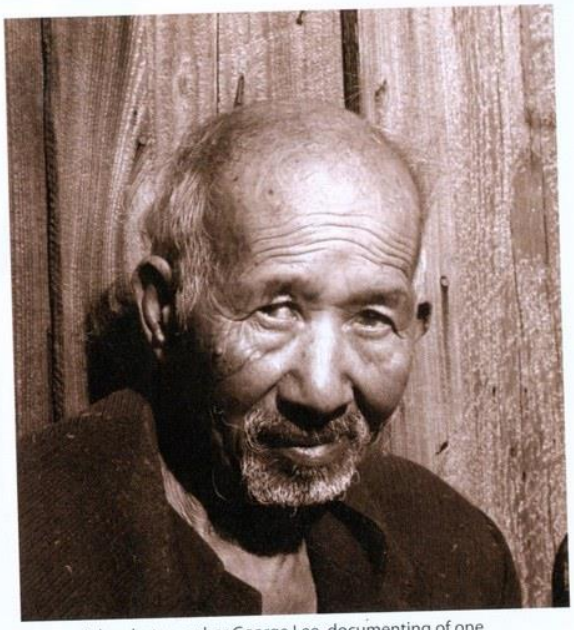
For most Californians, the history of Chinese immigrants in the West during the 19th Century borders somewhere between the notorious and the exotic. At best, the Chinese are viewed as marginalized participants in the region's expansive mythology—relegated to faceless stereotypes as railroad workers and laundrymen—while at worst they are overlooked or forgotten, tossed carelessly on the ash heap of history.

PHOTOGRAPHS GEORGE LEE

China Lane, looking west during the 1940s, which stretched from Front Street to the river.



Gue Shee Lee, mother of photographer George Lee and one of the last residents of the Santa Cruz Chinatown, with grandsons George Ow, Jr., and David Lee Ow, 1949.



A portrait by photographer George Lee documenting of one Chinatown's residents.

Photos Geoffrey Dunn Collection.

In fact, the Chinese played a central role in the economic development of modern-day California. Not only did their labor and work site ingenuity develop the state's transportation infrastructure, but they also played seminal roles in the development of the state's agriculture, fisheries and mercantile trade. For all their contributions, however, they were dubbed "coolies" and worse by the powers that be in the Golden State, often driven from their communities by repressive legislation or vigilante violence.

As Cabrillo College historian emeritus Sandy Lydon has noted in his superb *Chinese Gold: The Chinese in the Monterey Region* (currently available in a 20th Anniversary edition):

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.

Indeed, their watermarks can be found throughout Santa Cruz County, which claimed major Chinatowns in both Santa Cruz and Watsonville, along with several smaller communities scattered from Davenport to Capitola to the Pajaro River.

They, too, were subjected to the same brand of xenophobia directed at Chinese immigrants throughout the state. In one legendary local editorial, written in 1879, the Chinese were described as "half-human, half-devil, rat-eating, rag-wearing, law-ignoring, Christian civilization-hating, opium-smoking, labor-degrading, entrail-sucking Celestials." Welcomed here they were not.

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>
> George Ow, Jr. .

The City of Santa Cruz actually had four successive Chinatowns in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, all of which were located on the periphery of the city's burgeoning downtown business district. They were largely bachelor communities (Santa Cruz had the lowest percentage of Chinese women in the region) and many of the men worked as servants for upper-middle class families residing in the city's stately Victorian homes. Others worked in laundries and in vegetable gardens scattered around the city. A handful developed small businesses and retail stores, importing mercantile items from China.

It would be an overstatement to describe the Santa Cruz County Chinese immigrant economy as thriving, but it was as industrious as it was tenacious. At its peak in the 1890s, U.S. Census figures indicate that nearly five percent of the county's population was officially composed of Chinese immigrants.

In Santa Cruz, the city's final Chinese community—known as Birkenseer's Chinatown built along "China Lane"—was nestled between the San Lorenzo River and the city's downtown business district, just east of Front Street (located at the present site of the Galleria buildings and the Regal Riverfront Cinemas).

The lower end of Birkenseer's Chinatown was built predominantly on stilts as a precaution to seasonal flooding by the San Lorenzo. For the most part, the Santa Cruz Chinese community embraced the river—hauling in fish and waterfowl from

its waters and planting abundant gardens in the rich alluvial soil of its flood plain. For children growing up in Chinatown, it provided an entrée into a magical riparian wonderland.

In *Chinatown Dreams*, local businessman George Ow, Jr., who was raised as a young boy in the Santa Cruz Chinatown, recalls the river as a place of "steelhead swimming upstream during the winter rains," while during the rest of the year it was a place for he and his friends to "chase each other along the sandy river bottom, exploring the world of birds and fish and insects from one season to another."

In the 1920s and 1930s, Birkenseer's Chinatown provided the distractions of vice for the rest of the community—gambling, prostitution, bootleg liquor, even opium. The men who had come to the United States in the late 19th Century were now single old men, eking out meager livelihoods as fishermen, gardeners, handymen and seasonal cannery workers.

The late Santa Cruz photographer George Lee (1922-1998) grew up in Chinatown during this era and he began at an early age to take a series of remarkable photographs which dutifully documented the daily lives of the elderly men that still resided there. The men and the clapboard buildings proved to be "natural subject matter" for his growing interest in photography.

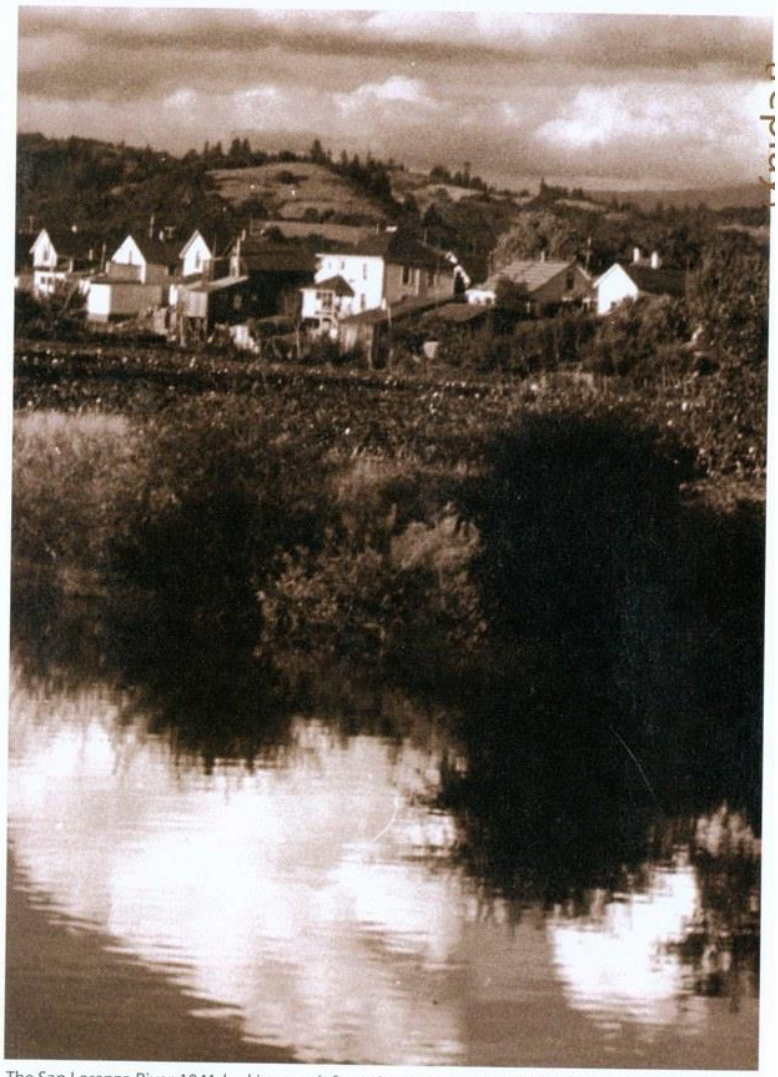
There had been major floods in Chinatown throughout the 1920s and '30s. During World War II, the city police clamped down on the illegal activities in the community and the population of elderly men was dying out, while the young families found housing elsewhere. Chinatown was on its last legs. The Great Flood of 1955 delivered the final blow. Only a handful of residents were still living there—including George Ow's grandmother, Gue Shee Lee—and they sensed their time in Chinatown had come and gone.

Ow was in the seventh grade when the flood hit. His memories of the surging San Lorenzo are vivid:

When we turned from Front Street into Chinatown, I saw a raging river at the end of China Lane. The river had overflowed its banks and was chewing up big chunks of grandma's garden. Slabs of earth as large as cars caved in and were carried away by the speeding water. Giant redwood trees, parts of houses and even small buildings swept past. A car floated by, and then another one. The river had become a gigantic onslaught of water, and seemed to be growing larger and more powerful as I watched.

Only a miracle could save Chinatown, Ow thought. But there would be no miracles. The waters kept rising—flooding downtown businesses all the way to Pacific Avenue. The river that had once sustained Santa Cruz's Chinatown now brought about its final demise.

By the end of the 1950s, the land along China Lane would be purchased by the city's Redevelopment Agency, and the once destructive San Lorenzo River tamed by levees designed by the Army Corps of Engineers—leaving yet another Chinese watermark on the pages of Santa Cruz history.



The San Lorenzo River, 1941, looking north from the Soquel Avenue Bridge, at what is now the County Government Center and San Lorenzo Park, directly across the river from Chinatown.

Photos Geoffrey Dunn Collection.

Geoffrey Dunn is the author of ***Santa Cruz Is in the Heart*** *and served as editor of* ***Chinatown Dreams: The Life and Photographs of George Lee.***