

Two Cousins From China and Gilroy's Early Seed Industry

**The California Pioneers of Santa Clara County
2008 Essay Contest**

by

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Introduction

"The soil of Gilroy is the Garden of Eden. We are finding out that it is becoming the source of life to the flower beds of the world. Hundreds of acres of the richest land are now being made to produce seeds under the intelligent culture of the yellow men of the Flowery Kingdom. The crop of the year has just been garnered, thrashed, sacked and carried away by the carload to San Jose, the distribution point from which it is sent to the seedsmen of all the nations. The Agriculture Department of Washington D.C. handles much of this seed and generously sends parcels out each year to give bearing and fragrance to the gardens of the developing settlements of the country. And flower seeds are not alone sent forth from the Gilroy seed farms. The dinner tables of this and other lands are supplied with vegetables produced largely from the seed farms of Gilroy. A large area of land is used for the production of vegetable seeds."

Gilroy Advocate, October 2, 1900

By the turn of the last century, editorials in the *Gilroy Advocate* regularly praised the vibrant local seed farms, which seasonally drew raves from train travelers crossing over the San Benito County line into Santa Clara County at Sargent Station, on the Pajaro River. Before their eyes, rail passengers beheld profuse acres of brilliant flowers and abundant vegetables, growing on the C.C. Morse Seed Ranch. They may also have noted, as the train passed through the blooming acreage, that during growing and cultivation season, dozens of Chinese workers were busy hoeing weeds from rows of growing plants. At harvest time, groups of the oriental laborers were seen cleaning and sifting the gathered seeds into large bags to be sent to the processing factory.

For several decades, two cousins, Chinese immigrants, Wong Ah Hem and Wong Hung Git, both worked with and supervised the laborers in the fertile growing fields owned by the C.C. Morse Company. Both men became successful in their own right, earning in time a comfortable living and a social prominence, given the era, in the Gilroy, San Juan Bautista and Hollister region.

In particular, Wong Hung Git, whose Americanized name became Henry Ohn, stands out in my own family's experience. That is because my

great-grandfather, Dr. Heverland R. Chesbro, a gentleman farmer who owned a dairy in the Bolsa region south of Gilroy, knew the Ohn family. My grandparents, Dr. and Mrs. Elmer J. Chesbro of Gilroy, eventually added Henry's daughter, Nellie, to our family. Since Dr. Heverland Chesbro and Henry Ohn became acquainted, six generations of our two families have remained friends and close associates. For California, with its constant stream of newcomers, six constant generations even knowing each other is a remarkable achievement. That the Anglo and Chinese-American descendants of the Ohns and Chesbros consider themselves "Family" as well, is extraordinary.

Wong Ah Hem, better known as Ah Hem, and his cousin, Wong Hung Git, or, Henry Ohn, were remarkable men, beginning their life careers in the infancy and very early years of Gilroy's seed industry. Their contributions to the industry itself, and the greater society of which they were a part, have left their own unique mark in the annals of Santa Clara County history.

Illustrations

The first five photos of Henry Ohn and family, below, had been given to the family's physician, Dr. James W. Thayer. Prior to his death in 1926, he gave them to Gilroy Historical Society founder, Armand White, who in the 1970s gave them to my mother, Dorothy Chesbro Ronald. According to Armand White, Dr. Thayer told him that Henry Ohn had the photographer come down from San Jose to his home at the Sargent Ranch to take the portrait with the large tree trunk background. The original photographs, which were unmarked and undated, were identified for me in 1981 by John Young, who knew the Ohn family when he was young.

1. Henry Ohn with second wife and baby son, Ah Lun.
2. Seated lady in ornate clothing is Henry's first wife, daughter Asta's mother.
3. John Young believed this picture of a girl in leather shoes and tassels on her hat was Asta. (Tassels on the hat indicate a girl).
4. Henry Ohn with second wife and baby Nellie
5. Baby chewing piece of bread is Nellie.
6. Henry Ohn family out for a drive. In the back seat, Henry's first wife is seated at his right, and second wife on his left. Front seat shows Asta driving, Nellie seated to her right, with both girls flanked by brothers Louis and Lun. From Nellie Ohn Cheu photo album, photo c. 1917-18. Photo courtesy Richard Cheu.
7. Church where Henry Ohn's funeral took place in 1926, "Chinese Mission House of the M.E. Church" at 916 Washington St., San Francisco, photo c. 1880. Photographer, True E. Hecht. Photo courtesy of California Historical Society.
8. "Stripping Lettuce of Dead leaves on a Seed Farm, Gilroy, California" from the article, "Seed Farming in California," National Geographic Magazine, May 1912, p.517.
9. "A Field of Sweet Peas, Morse Seed Farm, San Juan Valley, California: Farms of a Thousand or Five thousand Acres are Cared for like Gardens." From: Seed Farming in California, National Geographic Magazine, May, 1912, p. 516.

10." Morse and Co.'s Sweet Pea Farm near Gilroy, " from Sunshine, Fruit and Flowers: Santa Clara County and its Resources, A Souvenir of The San Jose Mercury, 1896, p. 74, reprinted by The San Jose Historical Museum Association, 1986.

11. Nellie Ohn Cheu with husband, Dr. Henry Cheu and sons Richard (left) and Donald (right). Photo taken in San Francisco at apartment of my parents, Dorothy and Jack Ronald, in 1942.





2



3



5



4

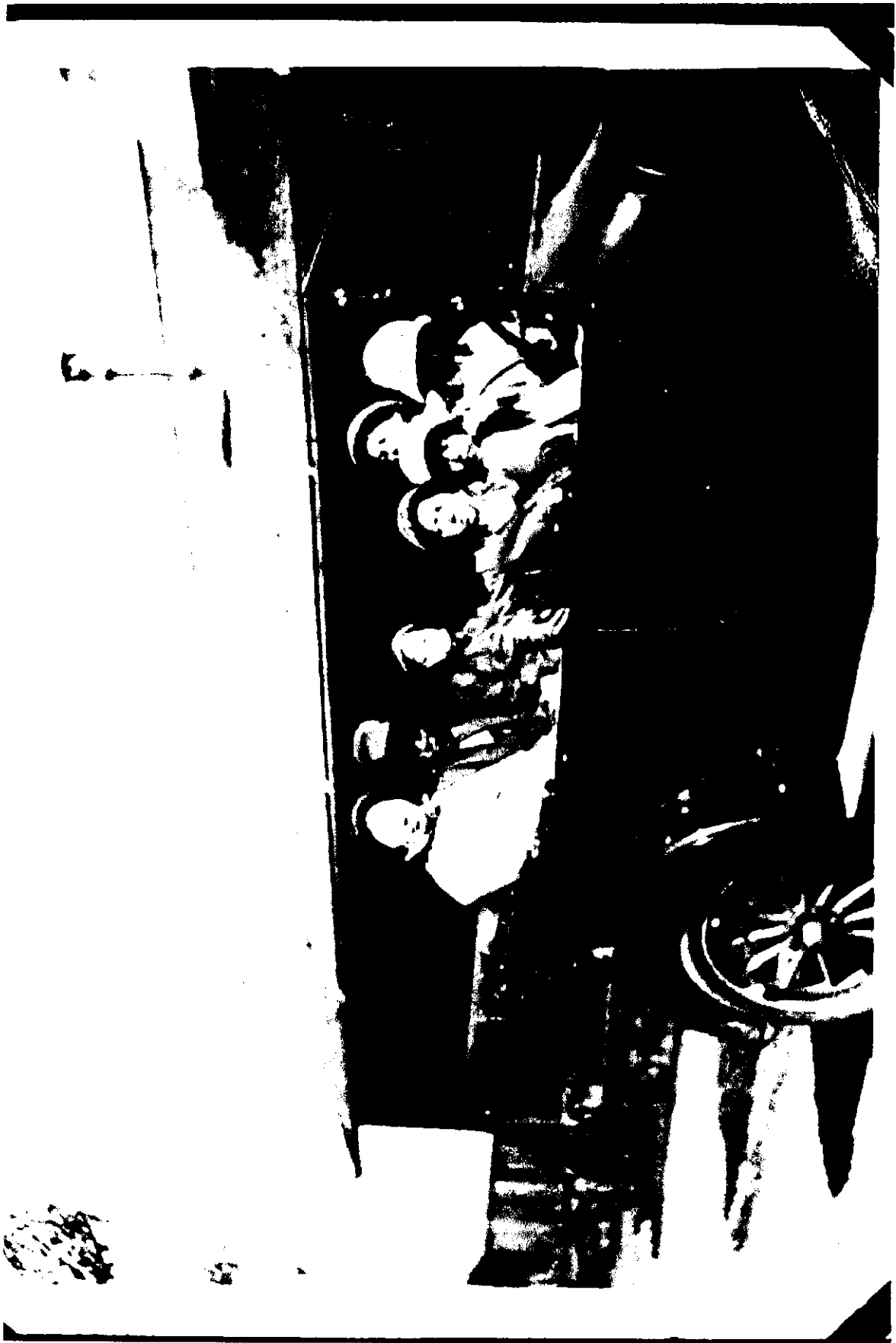






Photo by J. O. Tucker

STRIPPING LETTUCE OF DEAD LEAVES: ON A SEED FARM, GILROY, CALIFORNIA

Certain kinds of lettuce must have the head slashed with a knife to let the seed stalks out (see page 516.)

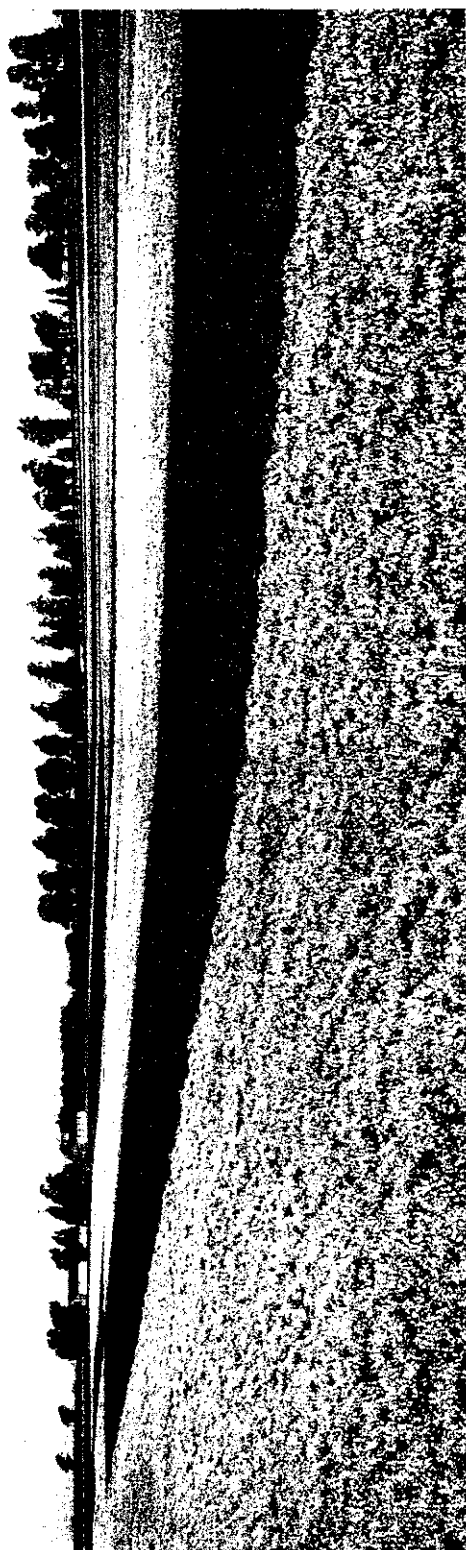


Photo from A. J. Wells
A FIELD OF SWEET PEAS, MORSE SEED FARM, SAN JUAN VALLEY, CALIFORNIA: "FARMS OF A THOUSAND OR FIVE THOUSAND ACRES ARE CARED FOR LIKE GARDENS."

On the seed farm in Arroyo Grande, onions are carried as "sets" to the head of the valley and planted in the higher and warmer soil for the sake of a better seed crop. So elsewhere growers, after the first year, ship the bulbs to the San Joaquin or the Sacramento valleys for the sake of a different soil and air in which to mature the seed, and to escape the blight, which is at once the bane and problem of growers of this seed in many regions.

The delta lands of the valleys just named are among the richest lands in the world, and are known as the California Netherlands. Onions do well the first year in a heavy black soil. Lettuce wants a heavy loam, as do sweet peas, while the radish seeds more quickly and does better in a lighter soil.

Plowing and preparation of the soil goes on from December to February, and most of the planting is completed before midwinter. Needless to say, the seed-bed is well stirred and the soil made fine. Farms of a thousand or five thousand acres are cared for like gardens. March, April, May, and the early part of June are given to steady cultivation and weeding. Seeds are grown without irrigation, save under extreme conditions, and cultivation is almost continuous, that moisture may be kept near the surface.

Much work must be done with the hoe, and hand-work of several kinds is necessary. Thus, certain kinds of lettuce must have the head slashed with a knife, to let the seed stalks out; onions as "sets" must be placed one by one right side up in the row and covered; celery, before being set out in the field, is twice transplanted; and carrots and



MORSE AND CO.'S SWEET PEA FARM NEAR GILROY.



Two Cousins from China and Gilroy's Early Seed Industry

Gilroy's Early Seed Companies

The C.C. Morse Company wasn't the only seed farm in the South Santa Clara and San Benito County region, but in its day was one of the first, the largest, and most innovative in seed cultivation and plant breeding. Its founder, Maine-born Charles Copeland Morse, had first come to California in 1862. After mining in Nevada, then working at Henry Rengstorff's Mountain View hay farm, in 1874 Morse went into the seed business with a partner, A.L. Kellogg. Three years later, the two men bought out a seed business in Santa Clara, later enlarging the operation with additional land purchases in the Mountain View area.

By 1884, Charles Morse had bought out Kellogg and formed his own company. When he died in 1900 at the age of 58, his son, Lester L. Morse, took over the business. Besides his field work in developing new varieties of lettuce, onion and sweet peas, Lester Morse expanded the company's operation by purchasing several local seed companies in the South Santa Clara County-San Benito County area.

In 1910, the C.C. Morse Company expanded again, this time buying 900 acres of the San Justo Ranch, located along Highway 156 between San Juan Bautista and Hollister. From that time on, growing operations for the company were headquartered at the ranch, which by 1930 had merged with the D.M. Ferry Company of Detroit, Michigan under the name Ferry-Morse Seed Company. The company farmed a total of about 1,800 acres in the Santa Clara-San Benito County area.

Other early seed companies in the region included the San Jose-based Braslan Seed Growers Inc., founded in 1892, which leased ranches in both Santa Clara and San Benito Counties, and the Waldo Rohnert Co. of Gilroy. Rohnert, who had been a superintendent overseeing seed production for the C.C. Morse Co.'s Gilroy farm, later established his own flower and vegetable seed company. The Pieters-Wheeler Co. of Gilroy was named for A.J. Pieters,

who founded a Hollister company in 1907, and Lin W. Wheeler, who worked for both Braslan Seed Growers and for A.J. Pieters, and was also a grower for Braslan. In 1910 Mr. Wheeler purchased the A.J. Pieters Seed Co.

Under the new name, Pieters-Wheeler Seed Co. of Hollister, the company which grew both vegetable and flower seeds, in 1913 located permanently in Gilroy. Following Mr. Wheeler's 1944 death in an automobile accident, the firm was taken over by John B. Scherrer. Another company, California Seed Growers of San Jose, which operated at both Hollister and Coyote, went out of business in 1931.

The C.C. Morse Seed Company's Early Years

Early laborers at the Gilroy area seed farms were Chinese immigrants. According to Frank Cuthbertson, former Executive Vice-President of Ferry-Morse Seed Co.,

"Readily available Chinese labor allowed for very fine garden farming to keep fields free of weeds by constantly hoeing to keep weed seeds out. Chinese were natural gardeners, thorough and careful in planting, growing and harvesting the seed crops. One of the first Chinese foreman was Ah Hem, who formerly was the foreman for a crew of Chinese laborers who worked for Mr. Leland Stanford at Palo Alto."¹

The Morse Company's San Juan Ranch supervisor, Ah Hem, had first gone to work for Mr. C.C. Morse in 1877.² It is interesting to note that his prior employer was Leland Stanford, whose Palo Alto farm had been established in 1870. Prior to this date, information about when he arrived in the United States, or how he came to work for Leland Stanford, is not known.

At the Morse Company's San Juan Ranch, Ah Hem oversaw an average of 80 to 150 Chinese workers who were seasonally tasked with meticulous hoeing. The specialty was known as rouging, for the rogue weeds which, if allowed to proliferate, could ruin a seed crop. Growers depended on the Chinese laborers' exacting work. According to Cuthbertson,

"The rouging of seed crops in the early days was usually done by a crew of Chinamen, under direction of a trained and experienced foreman. The Chinese were very good rogues as they seemed to have a very good eye for

variations and off-types. Today rouging is still carried on, but it requires a highly trained crew. Plant breeding is a very expensive part of modern seed growing business."³

The entire cultivation process, from planting, to tending the growing plants, to harvesting the seed crops, required reliance on the Chinese workers' care and thoroughness. Despite the company's dependence on them, pay and working hours during the era, according to Cuthbertson, were unequal to the wages of their white counterparts. While Chinese laborers earned 10 cents an hour, putting in 11-hour days during the harvest season, white workers were used as teamsters, and worked a 10-hour day, earning \$1.00 in per diem wages. Room and board for workers were figured at 50 cents per day. On wet days when the land couldn't be worked, the teamsters got room and board only for taking care of the horses. The Chinese workers, who lived in separate bunkhouses, had their own kitchen and cooked for themselves.

Work was labor-intensive. While a team-driven mowing machine was used for some harvesting, the workers also spent long days harvesting with hand-held sickles for cutting some crops. In the early, pre-mechanized days, the Morse ranch kept 100 horses to operate the cultivation equipment. After a crop was harvested, laborers carried out the initial steps in the field, flailing and screen-cleaning the seeds, then passing them through a hand-powered cleaning mill. Before the grain thresher was introduced, dry crops were flailed on a 40' x 40' canvas by crews of 6 to 8 men. By today's standards, the work was time-consuming and very hard. According to Cuthbertson, after removal of chaff and dust,

"The seed was sacked and delivered to a 4-story cleaning plant for final processing. Today, all mechanized cleaning is done at the plant where seeds are put into a hopper at one end of a 1-story building and run through the process, emerging sacked and ready for shipment at the other end."⁴

Irrigation methods, unlike today's sophisticated deep well irrigation, were primitive as well, depending in the early years on rainfall and drainage. Although fertilization is today considered indispensable for its highly

technical and predictable results, its use was not standard practice in the early seed industry, particularly not prior to 1925. When fertilization was used, stock manure was the common choice until 1935, when commercial fertilizer was introduced.

It was the early Chinese workers who helped make the C.C. Morse Company, and other local seed companies, into the successful enterprises they became. On July 15, 1899, the Gilroy Advocate published a long report on a group of 150 delegates to the convention of the Association of Agricultural Colleges and Experimental Stations who, as guests of the San Jose Board of Trade, spent an afternoon touring the South Santa Clara Valley agricultural areas.

It was an event in which Ah Hem, and his workers, played a role. The event was also attended by my great-grandfather, Dr. Heverland Chesbro, who was at the time Gilroy's Mayor. According to the report,

"The visits of these delegates to Santa Clara Valley is perhaps the most important event of the kind this county has yet experienced and a great amount of good will follow. The resources of the county will be advertised far and wide.

On leaving San Jose the special train arrived at Carnadero about 6 o'clock. Mr. Lester Morse arranged a fine dinner for the distinguished party, and showed them over his seed farm, which is the largest in the world. The gentlemen were delighted with the entertainment and expressed themselves as surprised and pleased at the wonderful adaptability of the soil. Several prominent gentlemen from Gilroy also enjoyed Mr. Morse's hospitality. The visitors were given the liberty of plucking all the sweet peas they could carry, and the ladies were charmed with the beautiful fields of flowers. Dr. Stubbs of Reno, Nevada, President of the Convention, made a neat speech in which he voiced the sentiments of the visitors to California. Dr. Jesse, President of the Missouri State University, also thanked Mr. Morse for his generous hospitality. Mayor Chesbro made a happy speech in which he expressed the pleasure it offered our people to meet such an intelligent body of men and women. He was glad they had an opportunity of seeing what Santa Clara Valley could produce. Mr. Morse presented each guest with a package of choice seed grown here, and the Chinese Superintendent, Ah Hem, presented each with a package of choice tea. One of the interesting features to the Easterners was the firing of two long strings of firecrackers by the Chinese. The entire body gave the following yell as they boarded the train:

"Rah! Rah! Rah!
Rah! Rah! Rah!

Rah! Rah! Rah!

Morse! Morse! Morse!"

The Messrs. Morse are to be congratulated on the enterprise displayed in entertaining this fine body of men and women from all over the country, and it is safe to predict their visit to this great seed farm will result in a greater demand than ever before for Morse & Co.'s seeds."

Further editorial praise for the local seed industry was offered six years later. Calling the Gilroy area "The Paradise for Seedmen," the Gilroy Gazette, in its October 6, 1905 issue noted,

"South Santa Clara County is indeed fast becoming the seedmen's home. Those interested in the cultivation of seeds are becoming more impressed each year with the advantages offered along these lines by this portion of our valley. The fertility of the soil, our climatic conditions favoring the proper drying of the seeds and other advantages have been given due attention."

Ah Hem

"The Morse Seed Co. controls 1250 acres of the richest land in the valley south and southeast of Gilroy. The entire tract is under the intelligent supervision of Ah Hem, who has been in the employ of the Morse's for 24 years, and is one of the most intelligent of his race in the State. At this season of the year the Morse Seed Farm is one of the chief attractions of the valley. Just think of 60 acres of sweet peas, of about 100 varieties, all abloom. It is truly a magnificent sight. The varieties are separated by rows of carrots or lettuce. The most delicately tinted varieties are here seen in such bewildering profusion as to make the visitor halt with exclamations of wonder and pleasure. There are a variety of other flowers, including asters, poppies and verbenas. About 250 acres are in onions, 70 acres in lettuce, and smaller acreage in tomato, parsnips, spinach and oyster plant. At present 80 men are employed, but in the busier season 150 men are needed. Ah Hem's cousin Henry is familiar with all the different varieties of peas, for he has made a close study of this favorite flower. "

The Morse Seed Farm, Gilroy Advocate, June 8, 1901

By the turn of the 20th Century, Ah Hem had become a prominent and well-known figure in the Morse Company's business. A major article in the Gilroy Advocate was devoted to his hosting the Chinese New Year

festivities at the Morse ranch. According to the Editor, who was also a guest at the event, the February 18, 1899 article reported on the guests, food, and festivities,

"The grand finale is made the occasion of a big feast to which the Superintendent, Ah Hem, invites his American friends. This year about forty guests were entertained. Dinner was served at 3:30 o'clock in the house of worship. Two long tables were arranged with care and taste and a bountiful supply of turkey, chicken and ham, with potatoes, bread, cake, fruit, nuts and candies, greeted the eyes of the white guests. Mr. Lester Morse presided at the main table. Full justice was done the well cooked viands. Between five and six o'clock the Chinamen had their display of fire crackers. Over forty boxes of fire crackers and bombs were used, the estimated cost being \$300. The crackers are strung on ropes and are about 12 to 15 feet long. They are suspended from a wooden arch erected for the purpose, and as fast as one string explodes another is lighted. The explosion of the last piece is really a wonderful sight. The din is deafening. Besides this constant racket the Chinamen explode large bombs and bunch after bunch of crackers. The Chinese also feast in their own quarters, and over one hundred of his countrymen enjoyed Ah Hem's hospitality. Their friends and "cousins" from all over the district make this a day of feasting and general rejoicing. The white guests were shown every courtesy by Ah Hem and his assistants, who seemed highly honored by the presence of the American guests."

Two years later, when Ah Hem chose a bride, he threw another elaborate celebration. As reported in the August 17, 1901 Gilroy Advocate,

"Ah Hem, the intelligent and gentlemanly Superintendent of the Morse Company's Seed Farm near Gilroy, was married in San Francisco last Saturday to Me Helm, a pretty little Chinese maiden of 17 summers. The marriage occurred at the Chinese Temple in Chinatown, the priest, Wong Chow Wow, performed the ceremony in Oriental style."

Locals were invited to meet and greet the new bride at the ranch,

"Ah Hem brought his wife home on the noon train, and the couple were driven in a surrey to their home at Carnadero. The walls of the cottage were decorated with long scrolls of red paper upon which were written the greetings of their Chinese friends. Bouquets of asters and chrysanthemum-sunflowers were placed about the room. A number of representative citizens, also employees of Morse's of Santa Clara, were invited to the wedding feast. There was an abundance of appetizing viands, including salads with mayonnaise dressing, cold ham and chicken, breads, olives, nuts, candies,

fruit, ice cream, cakes, and tea. Mr. and Mrs. Lester Morse of Santa Clara assisted the host in dispensing hospitalities with a lavish hand.

Ah Hem's wife went through the trying ordeal of inspection from the jeweled headgear to her tiny feet, in a modest manner. She was richly attired in brocade silks, handsomely embroidered, and wore many elegant gold bracelets and rings, present from Ah Hem's friends."

The guest list included a number of prominent Gilroy names, among them, State Senator Lyttleton Whitehurst (founder of Whitehurst-Hodges Lumber Company in Gilroy), Sam T. Moore (Panoche General Store owner and Hollister businessman), W.R. Pyle (Gilroy businessman), Herbert Robinson (Robinson Hardware Company of Gilroy), James Princevalle (grocer and future Gilroy Mayor), State Assemblyman Thomas Rea, and Gilroy Advocate Editor, William Blake. The account concluded with eloquent praise for the event's host,

"All departed wishing Ah Hem and his wife much happiness in their new relations. Ah Hem is held in high esteem by our businessmen and also by his employers, the Morses, and he was the recipient of many handsome presents."

The couple's daughter Me Cue, also known as Mary, was born at the Carnadero ranch on December 11, 1902. A son followed on June 21, 1905 but died on August 16, 1905. Another son arrived on May 23, 1907. Sadly, Me Helm and her new son both died on May 28, 1907.⁵

During this period, there were several other newspaper references to Ah Hem. An article in the January 4, 1902 Gilroy Advocate reported an accident which sent him to the Gilroy Private Hospital. "Ah Hem, the popular superintendent of Morse's Seed Farm, while in town was thrown from his buggy by a fractious horse a few days since and badly bruised about the head and face. He was taken to Dr. Clark's hospital for treatment."

Two years later, the January 23, 1904 Gilroy Advocate reported he was being treated for an unspecified condition, "Ah Hem, who has been under the care of a Chinese Physician in San Francisco for several weeks, returned Tuesday to resume his supervisory role at the Morse Seed Farm."

The still-recovering Ah Hem nonetheless extended his well-established tradition of including the larger community for Chinese New Year. The Gilroy Advocate described his generosity on February 20, 1904,

"Our Chinese population have been enjoying their New Year festivities the past few days and holding "open house" for their friends. There have been several sightseeing parties through Chinatown during the week and all were hospitably treated. Ah Hem, the gentlemanly overseer of Morse's Seed Farm, remembered all his American friends with presents in the shape of tea, silk handkerchiefs, candy and lilies. A messenger was sent to deliver these gifts. His friends will regret to learn that he was unable to attend these festivities this week on account of his old complaint, stomach trouble. He has sought advice of his physician in San Francisco and it is hoped he will be able to participate in the final blow-out at the seed farm next week."

He was soon well, according to the March 5, 1904 Advocate, "Ah Hem entertained his employers, the Morses, and a number of Gilroy friends at a banquet which was followed by the explosion of several hundred dollars' worth of firecrackers."

Following his wife's death, Ah Hem in early 1908, announced plans to visit his old home in China accompanied by a nephew, Wong Ah Ting. Before departing, he married again, this time in a Christian ceremony. This was doubtless inspired by the popular minister, Reverend Charles Oxnam, of Gilroy's Methodist Episcopal Church, North. Rev. Oxnam during his tenure in Gilroy had established a well-attended Chinese language Mens' Christian Mission for the local farm workers.

The wedding party included Ah Hem's only remaining child from his first marriage. The ceremony was held in San Francisco, as reported in the March 28, 1908 Gilroy Advocate,

"Wong Ah Hem, the supervisor of C.C. Morse Co. farms near Gilroy was married at the 15th Ave M.E. Church in San Francisco on Thursday, March 19, to Miss Elizabeth Hong of San Francisco. Rev. Charles Oxnam, pastor of the Gilroy Methodist Episcopal Church, officiated and it was under his ministrations some months since that Ah Hem embraced the Christian religion and became a member of Mr. Oxnam's church. A large number of Chinese people were present to witness the most interesting ceremony. The bridesmaids were Miss Mary Wong, daughter of the groom, and Miss Elizabeth Oxnam, daughter of the officiating clergyman. The bride was given

away by Charles Wong. Best man was Chan Ing, a business partner of the groom. The wedding march was played by Mrs. William Maddox of Grace Church, Oakland, and a fitting supper was served at the Puritan Cafe, partaken of by a number of Americans and Chinese. Ah Hem and his bride left Tuesday for a trip to China. They will be gone about 5 months and on their return expect to build a residence to live here permanently. Ah Hem wishes to make his home with the many friends who have been so kind to him for the past 2 years."

A report of the couple's journeys appeared in the September 5, 1908 Advocate, noting, "Wong Ah Hem, who is traveling through several provinces of China looking for land suitable for seed gardens for the C.C. Morse Seed Co. writes that he will not return until April."

After eighteen months, he still had not returned, and apparently was formulating new personal business plans. According to the Gilroy Advocate of February 5, 1910, "Wong Ah Hem, formerly connected with the Morse Seed Co., is laying out a new town near Hong Kong, China, and will not return until next year."

It was during this time frame that the Morse company added acreage to its local holdings, purchasing the 900-acre Flint tract for a seed farm, which was to include, according to the September 3, 1910 Gilroy Advocate, "Twelve large buildings are to be built, plus outhouses on the tract of land near San Juan Bautista which C.C. Morse Co. recently purchased. These will include a Superintendent's house, a Foreman's house, a ranch house, offices, three bunkhouses, a seed house, warehouses and sheds."

With the establishment of the new Republic of China, the Gilroy Advocate reported on the local excitement, noting on January 20, 1912, "The Chinese colony at San Juan is well supplied with the new banner of the Republic. The flag has been much in evidence the past week. The Chinese population of California is almost unanimous in its loyalty to the new republic."

A week later, Ah Hem's name was mentioned, along with his cousin Henry Ohn, in a similar connection. Referring to the area located on south

Monterey Street in Gilroy which was at the time called "Chinatown," for the number of Chinese merchants who lived there, the January 27, 1912, Gilroy Advocate reported,

"Local Chinese in Chinatown celebrated the new Republic of China by a great demonstration with firecrackers exploded. The event attracted the Chinese population as well as the American population of town. To a man the Chinese chopped off their cues [*sic* .] and donned American clothes.

"Ah Henry [Ohn], who has been spending several months in China, returned recently. He tells that Ah Hem, former field superintendent for the Morse Seed Co., has been laying out a town in China and as soon as his work is finished, will return to Gilroy, which he expects will be within a year. Henry is glad to be back in Gilroy again."

For the next eight years, no further mention of Ah Hem's name appears in Gilroy newspapers. Then, in 1920, a Gilroy Advocate article reports on his 17 year-old college-bound daughter, Mary, referred to by her Chinese name of Mey (My) Cue. She had been living in Kwongtung, China, in the town and region of Taimochung, Heungshan with her father and stepmother. She had departed Hong Kong on December 25, 1919 aboard the ship, Nile. After arriving at San Francisco on January 22, 1920, she was sent to Angel Island until a determination could be made to allow her to re-enter her native country in order to study.⁶ Because of the era's anti-Chinese discrimination laws, in order to re-enter the United States, even as an American citizen, she had to seek help from the family's Gilroy physician, Dr. Thayer. Also mentioned in the article is my grandfather, Dr. Elmer J. Chesbro. According to the January 31, 1920 Gilroy Advocate,

"Dr. J.W. Thayer went to San Francisco on Wednesday to testify before the Immigration Commission at Angel Island regarding the birth of Mey Cue Wong, a pretty Chinese girl who is seeking admission to the United States. Miss Wong is the daughter of Ah Hem Wong, who was for many years the Superintendent of Morse Seed Farm in the vicinity of Gilroy. She was born at the Rea Ranch at Carnadero, and our citizens well remember the festivities that marked her christening. She was 17 years of age last December. Ah Hem left California a few years ago and went back to the Flowery Kingdom where he is in the importing business. He has a branch in San Francisco and during the war made a fortune. He was in good circumstances when he left here. He

is sending his daughter to California to receive an American education. The young lady will reside in San Francisco with her relatives, Dr. Wong Hem and his sister. Dr. Wong Hem was a classmate of Dr. Elmer J. Chesbro of Gilroy. Miss Wong's cousin, Henry Ohn, is a resident of San Benito County."

From this point, Ah Hem is no longer referred to in the Gilroy newspapers. Except for returning to San Francisco to establish an import business, his stay in China appears to have become permanent.

Henry Ohn

"Just think of 60 acres of sweet peas, of about 100 varieties, all abloom...Ah Hem's cousin Henry is familiar with all the different varieties of [sweet] peas, for he has made a close study of this favorite flower. "

The Morse Seed Farm, *Gilroy Advocate*, June 8, 1901

According to his grandson, Richard Cheu, Wong Hung Git, later known as Henry Ohn, was born in China on September 9, 1861, in the Wong village of Sui Ho Tung, in the Eighth District. Before the 1911 formation of the Chinese Republic, the area was known as the island of Wong Leung Doe, in Chung San County, Kwangtung (now Guangdong) Province. Henry was the second of four brothers. The district where the Wongs lived was located on the delta of the Pearl River, adjacent to Macao.⁷

Henry departed for America and came to work at the Morse Farm, taking a supervisory role along with his cousin, Ah Hem. He had two wives, the first was named Leong Shee, who was the mother of his daughter, Asta, born June 19, 1901. His second wife, Lee Shee, was born in China in 1861 and was the mother of his second daughter, Nellie, born November 10, 1907. According to notes from Henry's grandson Richard Cheu, "in accordance with Chinese custom, Henry Ohn, his two wives, and their offspring, lived together as one family, as evidenced in the photographs of the Ohn family from the collection of Dr. Thayer. Dr. Thayer delivered Ah Hem's daughter, and most likely Asta and Nellie."

Reference to one of Henry's marriages is found in *Gilroy Advocate* on Feb. 10, 1900, in connection with a Chinese New Year fete given by Ah Hem.

"The closing festivities of Chinese New Year were celebrated at the Morse Seed Farm at Carnadero in the usual novel manner. Ah Hem, the intelligent Superintendent of Mr. Morse's interests, here, gave a fine dinner to his American friends. About 50 of our prominent citizens, their wives or daughters, enjoyed the feast... Ah Hem's cousin Henry introduced several of the ladies to his wife, who showed them her wedding outfit and trinkets. Ah Hem received much praise from his guests on the successful termination of the festivities and was given three hearty cheers from the assembled spectators. The display of cake and fruits as offerings to the "Josh" (sic.) excited universal comment."

A year later, on March 2, 1901, according to Gilroy Advocate, Henry Ohn (sometimes referred to as Ah Henry), was a superintendent,

"The Chinese festival of the Chinese New Year took place at the Morse Seed Farm at Carnadero on Tuesday afternoon. Ah Henry, the Superintendent, had invited a large number of his American friends to enjoy the afternoon, and about 100 men, women and children gathered there. At 4 o'clock, a special feast composed of roast chicken and turkey, cold boiled ham, mashed potatoes, bread and butter, fruits, cakes, Chinese candies and nuts and tea was served in the old dairy house. Three tables were set. This was followed by a display of fireworks and an incessant firing of firecrackers. About \$300 worth of fireworks were exploded. Among the Chinese guests were the wife and two children of a prominent Chinese physician of Mission Street in San Francisco. Their children were gorgeously arrayed in Oriental fashion, in expensive silks and jewelry and attracted a great deal of attention. Among the white guests were: Mr. and Mrs. B.W. Morse, Mrs. C.C. Morse, Miss Winfred Morse and Thomas Landrum from Santa Clara, Mr. Guy Smith, and the Misses Smith from Illinois, and Mr. Hart from San Francisco."

One of the guests, Mr. Thomas Landrum, was Vice President of the C.C. Morse Company. He moved from Gilroy to the San Juan Ranch property in 1900 to assume management of the operation and lived at the ranch until his death in 1960. Another guest, Albert Hart, also associated with the company, had helped Morse select the San Juan acreage for the expansion of its seed growing business.

According to Richard Cheu's father-in-law, John Young, with whom I had a conversation in 1981 regarding Henry's second daughter, Nellie, he said her actual relationship with her siblings is cloudy. There were two sons in the

family, which he referred to as either half-brothers or as adopted. Asta was her half-sister. In our 1981 conversation, John Young, who during his boyhood had known Henry Ohn and the family, told me he thought that the first wife (Asta's mother) had adopted the first son, named Bong, or Ah Louis. He believed the second wife (Nellie's mother) adopted the other boy, called Ah Lun. He told me that neither boy was a baby when adopted, that they were older. He said that when the first wife died, she was buried in San Juan Bautista, but that perhaps her bones were later exhumed and sent to China. I was unable to find cemetery records for either wife in the Gilroy obituary files, and none could be found in the burials records for San Juan Bautista.

Nellie's mother died in 1918. The Gilroy Advocate noted her passing in its August 24, 1918 issue,

"Henry Ohn, who was formerly connected with the Morse Seed Farm in this district, but who has been living near Hollister for some time, was bereaved by the death of his wife, aged 57 years, on Sunday night. She leaves 4 children, all of whom have been well-educated. The body will be preserved for 7 years and then returned to China for burial."

According to the United States Census for 1920, the only census citation I was able to find for the Henry Ohn household, the family at that time was living at San Juan Township, San Benito County, and the household members consisted of Henry Ohn, age 59, wife Lee Sum Ohn, age 32, Asta, 18; Louis, 17; Nellie, 12; and Len [Lun], 10.⁸

Early Sweet Pea Development and Henry Ohn

From the start of his employment at the Morse Seed Company, Henry's talents had been in horticultural development. He had joined the company at a propitious time in its history: by the turn of the 20th Century, the sweet pea, or *Lathyrus odoratus*, had emerged as a star attraction of the C.C. Morse Seed Company. The flower's popularity and the potential for its development into new strains was a factor leading to the acquisition of the company's large seed growing and experimental farm south of Gilroy. According to the Gilroy

Advocate, by 1901, about 60 acres of the rich San Juan ranch land were seasonally devoted to growing about 100 varieties of the colorful and abundantly fragrant blossom.

The flower's progenitor, according to the Ferry Morse centennial volume "The Seeds of Tomorrow 1856-1956," was the late-flowering "Blanche Ferry," a sweet pea first introduced by the Ferry Company of Detroit in 1889. "Blanche Ferry" became the American parent from which early flowering sweet peas were developed. "Much of basic sweet pea breeding done in California by the C.C. Morse Company...gave birth to a whole new family of sweet pea...[it was] longer-stemmed, larger blossomed, freer blooming, brighter colored, sturdier growing and more heat-resistant than any other seen before..."⁹

After Lester Morse took over reins of the C.C. Morse Company following his father's 1900 death, he devoted a large part of his attention to the improvement of existing strains of both vegetables and flowers. He was particularly interested in developing new sweet pea varieties. Frank Cuthbertson, Executive Vice-President of the Ferry-Morse Seed Company, is given credit for development of many new strains.¹⁰

As a horticulturist for the company, Henry Ohn not only worked on new sweet pea varieties for the company, he also devoted his energies to a private project, developing a formula for the yellow sweet pea. The pure yellow sweet pea was a strain scientists had never been able to accomplish, only managing to produce a pale creamy shade of the color.

Although today sweet peas come in a wide range of brilliant colors, to include lavender-blues, pinks, reds, and creams, even today, a true yellow sweet pea, such as Henry Ohn worked on, has not been developed. Many species have been crossed, but even in this age of advanced molecular biology, only the cream color or a combined color, has been achieved. Although modern science has moved far beyond the genetic research of Henry's day, according to the experts, those initial expectations of being able to breed a yellow sweet pea by conventional means faded early in the 20th Century.

Today, further attempts are being made by crossing the sweet pea with other species.

In a telephone conversation in 1981 with John McCabe, formerly of Ferry-Morse's Salinas office, I was told that, to the best of his knowledge, there has never been a yellow sweet pea developed such as that Henry Ohn worked on. He told me that developing a true yellow sweet pea had been high on the priority list of his former boss, Frank Cuthbertson, who was a sweet pea breeder from Scotland. He did believe that technology might be available one day to cross a relative of that particular sweet pea family with a normal sweet pea and get fertilization and germination from seeds without embryos.

In an interview with Timber Press in 2008, Graham Rice, author of "The Sweet Pea Book," was asked about the yellow sweet pea. He said that a wild sweet pea species had been discovered in Turkey in 1987 and noted of the flower, "*The lathyrus bellinensis* is orange-yellow with red veins and it may be a key to creating a yellow sweet pea. He continued,

"A truly yellow sweet pea has been so elusive because all sweet peas are derived from one species, *lathyrus odoratus*, and none has ever been found with any yellow pigmentation in the flowers. A few, like 'Castle of Mey' and 'Jilly' are deep cream, but those are the closest we have. The recently discovered *L. Bellinensis* is mainly yellow in color but at first it seemed genetically incompatible with our familiar sweet peas, so hybrids could not be made. But such is the lure of the yellow sweet pea that breeders are now using sophisticated techniques (but not genetic modification) to try to make hybrids and there has been some progress. Although there have been promising results, it will still be many years before we have a truly yellow variety with the flower quality and fragrance."¹¹

According to my mother, Dorothy Chesbro Ronald, Nellie told her that Henry apparently was successful in developing a yellow sweet pea formula and had kept his research to himself. He wrote out the formula, and for safekeeping, hid it in the walls of his house. At some point he showed Nellie where the paperwork was located. He told her that the formula was to be her inheritance in case something happened to him.

Over the years, references to Henry Ohn are fewer in the Gilroy Advocate than for his cousin, Ah Hem. According to his daughter, Asta, he

was known locally as the "Chinese Luther Burbank" for the many new flower varieties he developed. She claimed he had entered examples of his work in international exhibitions, one submission possibly being shown in 1913 in London.

We do find from local reports that he had sufficient resources and job security to afford a trip back to his homeland. An item in the January 27, 1912 Gilroy Advocate notes, " Ah Henry (Henry Ohn,) who has been spending several months in China, returned recently. He tells that Ah Hem, former field superintendent for the Morse Seed Co., has been laying out a town in China and as soon as his work is finished, will return to Gilroy, which he expects will be within a year. Henry is glad to be back in Gilroy again."

Because Henry Ohn believed in advanced education, throughout their upbringing, he encouraged his children in their studies. Asta graduated with a Master of Arts from the University of California, Berkeley, and in 1927 became an instructor of chemistry and nutrition at the University of Southern California, later traveling to Beijing to become Dean of Women at the University of China. Nellie graduated with honors in 1928 as a Registered Nurse from Childrens' Hospital in San Francisco. Records are nearly non-existent for Henry's adopted sons. According to Henry's grandson, Richard Cheu, Louis is thought to have died prior to his Nellie's 1929 wedding, as evidenced that his name does not appear on the list of wedding gift donors. Lun's obituary appeared in the December 11, 1926 Gilroy Advocate, which noted he had died of tuberculosis on December 4, 1926 in Berkeley. Both sons were buried in San Francisco.

Henry Ohn died on May 22, 1925 at his home near Sargent, located on the Pajaro River on the Santa Clara-San Benito County line. In an article headlined "Popular Chinese Seed Grower Dies," the May 30, 1925 Gilroy Advocate reported that, "Henry Ohn was one of the kings of the local Chinese colony for many years. He was a native of China, aged 65 years, but had been a resident of this country for 40 years...[He] was a Christianized Chinaman, and a thorough gentleman in every respect...At the time of his death, he was

working for the Braslan Seed Co. as superintendent of their seed farm near Sargent. He had been ill with heart trouble for one year. The funeral took place Sunday in San Francisco from the M.E. Church there, burial being in the Chinese cemetery."

At the time of her father's death, Nellie was about to graduate from Gilroy High School, along with her friend, Marion Chesbro, who was my grandfather's sister. She came to live in Gilroy with my grandparents, Dr. and Mrs. Elmer Chesbro, and became the "big sister" to their daughter, my mother, Dorothy. This cemented a continuing family relationship which had begun between my great-grandfather, Dr. Heverland R. Chesbro, and Henry Ohn, a family tie that has lasted through the generations since.

Shortly after she moved into the Chesbro home, in the course of conversation, Nellie told my grandfather about the yellow sweet pea formula, the promised inheritance which was still hidden in the walls of her former home. "Well, if it's meant to be yours, let's get in the car and drive down and get it," he replied. Alas, when they pulled up to the house, they found much to their sorrow, that the place had burned down, and the formula with it, the night before.

With Henry Ohn's demise a chapter was concluded in the early seed development of the Morse (later the Ferry-Morse) Seed Company. He was a notable contributor to the development of many new strains of flowers, of which the sweet pea was especially favored. According to the company's 1956 Centennial history, it was during those years following the 1889 introduction of the late-flowering "Blanche Ferry" sweet pea, many of them years during which Henry Ohn worked for the company, that Ferry-Morse eventually developed 262 new varieties of the scented climber.¹²

Had he lived longer, Henry would have been proud of his daughters' accomplishments. Not only in the academic achievements of Asta, who enjoyed many successful years as a college instructor, but also in Nellie's achievements. In 1929, Nellie married Dr. Henry Cheu, a graduate of San Francisco's Stanford Medical School. Dr. Cheu operated a private practice in

San Francisco, and also served as Chief of Staff of the city's Chinese Hospital. Beginning with her husband and extending to her grandchildren, three generations of Nellie's family have earned degrees from Stanford University.

Conclusion

Today, seeds from Gilroy's abundant and sophisticated seed industry are still sent around the globe to supply food for many nations. Development, cultivation and harvesting of ever-new strains of seeds, surely a far cry from the hand-and horse operations of a century ago, still uphold the proud claims first made in the October 2, 1900 Gilroy Advocate, that "The dinner tables of this and other lands are supplied with vegetables produced largely from the seed farms of Gilroy."

According to the script of a talk titled "History of the San Juan Ranch," given on behalf of Ferry-Morse's Field Production Headquarters and Research Division in 1961, "Two very wise and able Chinese, Ah Hem and later, Henry Ohn, played an important part in the early day company farming operations."¹³ It was the early work of these Chinese pioneers, Ah Hem and Henry Ohn, and their industrious dedication to their profession, which helped make the Gilroy seed industry a forerunner in the development of new crop and flower strains. As such, these two cousins from China can proudly take their honored places in the annals of Santa Clara County history.

Just as notable is the legacy of memories that Henry Ohn left behind in China. In 1986, when his grandson, Richard Cheu and wife Janey, were visiting China, they went to Henry's ancestral village. "When we descended from the minibus, Janey took out her camera to take pictures of all the children gathered around the car. All the kids fled except for two young children who asked to have their picture taken. Then, the children led us into the village and stopped in front of an abandoned house with a pig roaming around in it. They invited us to enter but Janey told them we couldn't enter unless their parents invited us.

"Then Janey told the assembled and curious villagers that my grandfather came from this village. An elder said that he remembered the name and told us that a farmer related to us was out in the fields. They sent for him. He turned out to be the grandson of one of Henry Ohn's brothers. The children [playing outside] were his children. The house they invited us to enter was my grandfather's. We went into the house with our new-found relative. Janey found a chipped teapot that probably was used by Henry Ohn's family. She brought it home with her. The villagers twittered and thought it odd that Janey wanted a broken teapot.

"Our relative then invited us to visit his home. There, he brought out a wooden plaque which had been buried to hide it from the Communists during the Red Guard era. On the plaque is the history of Henry and his three brothers, written at the time when Henry was leaving for America.¹⁴"

Endnotes

¹ Cuthbertson, Frank, "Seed Growing in California." undated tract, c. 1947.

² "Ah Hem, [who] has been in the employ of the Morse's for 24 years,"

The Morse Seed Farm, *Gilroy Advocate*, June 8, 1901

³ Cuthbertson, *ibid.*

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Obituary files, Gilroy Museum, Gilroy, California

⁶ "My Cue Wong, Born USA" [HYPERLINK: www.Ancestry.com> California Passenger and Crew Lists> 1893-1957, 1920> January> Nile]

⁷ email correspondence, Re: 1986 Trip to China. Richard Cheu to Elizabeth Barratt, April 7, 2004.

⁸ Federal Census for 1920 [HYPERLINK: www.Ancestry.com>California>San Benito County>San Juan>Henry Ohn] Accessed March 7, 2008.

⁹ The Seeds of Tomorrow: 1856-1956. Volume © 1956 by the Ferry Morse Company, no author, p.15

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ "Interview with Graham Rice, author of "The Sweet Pea Book," [HYPERLINK:www.Timberpress.com/media/getAuthorByID.cfm?AuthorID=27.] Accessed on March 9, 2004.

¹² The Seeds of Tomorrow, p. 12

¹³ "History of the San Juan Ranch." script of a talk given on behalf of Ferry-Morse's Field Production Headquarters and Research Division. 1961. No author given, possibly John McCabe.

¹⁴ Cheu email, *ibid.*

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Telephone conversation, 1981, Elizabeth Barratt with John McCabe, Salinas, California regarding Frank Cuthbertson and Sweet Pea research

Interview, 1981, Elizabeth Barratt with John Young regarding Henry Ohn family and photograph identification of Dr. Thayer collection, Monterey, California

Interview, 1981, Elizabeth Barratt with Dorothy Chesbro Ronald regarding Henry Ohn Family history and her childhood recollections of Nellie Ohn Cheu.