

1993 SANTA CLARA COUNTY HISTORICAL ESSAY

THE LOST CHINATOWN

-and Its Legacies

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Introduction

A trivia question: where in the U.S. was the first Chinatown established?

If you answer San Francisco, then I am sorry to inform you that you are very wrong. The correct answer, really, is San Jose. "But there isn't a Chinatown in San Jose!" one of you shouted. That is true, but there *was* one in the history of the city. At its peak, that town brought prosperity as well as an exotic culture into the city. Though it faded long ago, it nevertheless stands as an integral part of our history. More importantly, it testifies to a people's painful strive for the American Dream. It is my purpose in this research paper, therefore, to report truthfully about this forgotten town and the legacies it left behind.

Chinese in the Wild West

The Chinese have long established their presence in California. In 1852, there were 25,000 of them in the state. Until the Chinese Exclusion Law of 1882 specifically banned immigration from China, that number rose steadily to 75,218 compared to 105,465 in the entire U.S.. The allure of California was not hard to explain. Traditionally attached to land, the Chinese adored the temperate climate and the vast variety of crops and fruits in the Golden State. Indeed, on this land they found their importance as the major labor force in the later half of nineteenth century. It was also on the same land, however, that they encountered the unmollified hostility of white settlers. The unsympathetic courts ignored assaults and even murders of Chinese while passing increasingly severe restrictions on naturalization and immigration. Disillusioned, some Chinese returned to their native country, but most stayed. To protect themselves, they lived in segregated areas, creating the so called Chinatown in every major city. Each Chinatown had its own characteristics, yet its arrangement shared similarities with that of others. In essence, the Chinatown had become a transplanted Chinese village society. Gradually, however, as the Chinese adapt to the Western culture and the hostility reside, they no longer had to depend on the isolated shelter alone to survive. Their children and grandchildren grew up accustomed to the Western cultures and gradually moved into the mainstream

through education. Finally, in the twentieth century, they could established their claims as Americans.

The Origin of San Jose's Chinatown

In 1840's, bad weather pervaded in southern China and left the harvest meager. The government, dominated by the Manchus, was weak and therefore unable to assist its starving citizens. Seeking to support their crying families, young men quit their farms in search for other means of survival. When buyers from overseas came to tell them about a country full of gold and fertile soil, hundreds of them, the bravest of all, sold themselves for a chance to that promised land. These "pigs," as their market value accurately reflected, embarked on a long journey across the Pacific Ocean to the United States of America. When they arrived, however, only backbreaking work greeted them. Many of the Chinese worked for the Central Pacific railroad after the Civil War. Others settled down as indentured farmers. The white residents found the Chinese labor cheap and reliable, but they resented their (the Chinese's) outlandish looks and foreign tongues. To escape that hostility, the Chinese established their reservation to protect themselves. That first Chinatown, established in late 1860's, located in Market and San Fernando streets in downtown San Jose. After the city ordered an evacuation in 1870 due to protests from neighbors, the town moved to Vine Street beside the Guadalupe River but moved back to downtown again in 1872. The town was prone to misfortune, however, as evidenced by a mysterious fire that destroyed it in 1887. Not allowed to rebuilt, the Chinese leased land from a

wealthy man named John Heinlen and rebuilt the Chinatown at Fifth and Taylor streets amid public outcry. This new Chinatown would be the most famous of all Chinatowns in the Santa Clara Valley and a true haven for its residents and their culture.

The First Town

Not much was known about the first Chinatown at Market and San Fernando streets. It was burnt in 1870 and rebuilt. At its peak, the town housed some 500 Chinese, a relatively large minority since San Jose had 9,000 total population. There were few families whose children attended a small school within the town, restaurants, herb doctors, palm readers, musicians, butchers, grocers, and several writers hired to write letters home for the illiterate laborers. There were, in addition, other less respectable businesses such as prostitution, gambling houses, and opium shops. Most men, however, were either farming hands or miners who worked for white owners of neighboring fields. Despite their hard work, their relations with their white neighbors were strained. The white businessmen of downtown complained about the noise and the foreign smell of barbecued meat and incense that permeated the air. The new City Hall, right across from Chinatown, became horrified at the sins of prostitution and drugs (opium). In 1886, it proposed to force the Chinese to move from downtown. A year later, another fire conveniently solved City Hall's problem: it burnt down most wooden buildings in Chinatown on a hot May's day, causing \$75,000 in property damage. Few evidences raised the question of arson: 1) the large water tank at the end of Chinatown, never empty before, was empty that morning; and 2) several white owners of Chinatown buildings, including prominent San Joseans Edward

Avzerais and P.T. McCabe, added heavily on their fire insurance just two weeks before the inferno.¹ Ironically, the city breathed a sigh of relief at the destruction of a whole business district. The San Jose Daily Herald actually declared, almost cheerfully, that "Chinatown is dead. It is dead forever."²

¹San Jose Mercury News, Feb 24, 1986. pp.1B

²San Jose Daily Herald, May 5, 1887.

Heinlenville

Much to the city's dismay, however, the homeless Chinese wanted to rebuild their town. A German rancher named John Heinlen leased land to them amid cries of treason from other white businessmen. Then, a year later, a new Chinatown built in the neighborhood bounded by Sixth, Seventh, Jackson and Taylor streets signaled the rebirth of a new Chinese-American generation and its determination to stay.

This time, the buildings were made of brick. As one Chinese proudly said, "they can't burn us out anymore." Heinlen even ordered a high fence built around the town to allow the Chinese privacy. Amid the locked gate, the new Chinatown, or popularly referred to as Heinlenville, prospered. More businesses sprout up than before, including merchandising stores, tongs (a Chinese version of street gangs), and district associations (community centers). People lived in the back of their stores and gossiped sitting beside the street. Children ran about the streets without fearing anyone calling them "dirty Chinese." The gates opened on weekends to admit Chinese from other areas. Heinlenville was indeed a magnet for those who sought privacy and comfort among those of their own kind. And at the heart of the town stood the Ng Shing Gung, a Taoist temple housing five Taoist deities, three male and two female. The Chinese was not a religious people, but they believed worshipping deities from their folklore would bring good luck. Indeed, the deities

answered their prayers. Agriculture boomed in Santa Clara Valley, requiring more and more hands in the fruit business. Despite Article XIX of the California state constitution that specifically banned employing "directly or indirectly, any Chinese or Mongolian," white farmers hired thousands of Chinese laborers. Meanwhile, good wages allowed the single men in Chinatown to bring their wives and children from China, expanding Chinatown rapidly. At one time, more than 4,000 Chinese were counted. At the turn of the century, the Japanese and Filipino took refuge in the town as well, later forming a Japantown adjacent to it. After World War I, however, young Chinese unwilling to farm left the town, bringing in a gradual decline of Chinatown. Finally, in 1930, the city of San Jose took possession of Heinlenville due to the back taxes owed by John Heinlen's heirs. By that time, it was virtually a ghost town. It was demolished in 1949, signaling the end of the last Chinatown in San Jose. The following sections discuss various aspects of that late Chinatown.

The Tongs Within the town, most Chinese were farmers, merchants, clerks, cooks, and menial workers. Unlike the white Americans, they enjoyed few hobbies, the most prevalent of which was gambling. They played pai gow, an earlier version of keno, fanton, a simple button guessing game, and other Chinese games for money. The tongs controlled these game houses and became prominent. The most famous tongs included the Chee Kong Tong, Hip Sing Tong, Hop Sing Tong, and Bing Kong Tong. At first, the

tongs were more concerned with the political events back in China. The Chee Kong Tong, for one, advocated the end of Manchu rule in China and kept in contact with the founding father of the Republic of China, Sun Yet-sun. Later, however, the tongs grew corrupted. They began to harass merchants and to kill other rival tong members. Their tactics were something of a legend: a leader of one of the tongs, Jew Sing, reportedly died from a poisoned goose. In 1923, the notorious Tong War erupted between the Hop Sing Tong and the Suey Sing Tong, killing several men in the middle of the street. After a police crackdown, the power of the tongs declined.

Political Organization

The Chinatown residents obeyed a political system separate from that of San Jose. Their town "government" was made up of several elder males, each from the most prominent families in town. These men decided the affairs and settle disputes. Under them, each store in town represented a family unit from a particular region in China and governed its members. Few ever contested the decisions of the elders because the Chinese believed in the wisdom of age.

The Ng Shing Gung Temple

As mentioned before, the Ng Shing Gung Temple was a Taoist temple. It housed five deities, three male and two female. Taoist disciple who resided in the temple offered soothing verses to people inquiring about their fortunes. The temple also had

two very different functions as a school and a hotel. On weekends, the Chinese parents sent their children to the temple to learn Chinese writing. On weekdays, the temple housed travelers who did not have family in the town. True to its religion, the temple never turned anyone away and was said to have saved many souls. And yet, in 1949, it was the temple itself that must be saved. When the city officials ordered the demolition of Chinatown, they ordered workers to tear down Ng Shing Gung as well. Groups of Chinese pleaded and tried to raise money to save it but to no avail. In 1991, however, the San Jose Historical Museum at Kelley Park made a replica of the Ng Shing Gung Temple for exhibition. The five deities had finally come home.

Colorful Characters of Yesterday

Lou Sing Kee

Born in Saratoga in 1895, Kee served in the U.S. Army in World War I. He came home to a big parade in honor of him. City officials lauded his war efforts and presented him a gold watch while his fellow Chinese applauded. Kee became the hero of every boy in the Chinatown, but his significance far extended that. In effect, he symbolized the possible acceptance of the Chinese into America's main stream society.

Lynne Shew

Born in Heinlenville in 1895, Shew was the foster daughter of writer Jessie Juliet Knox. She graduated from San Jose High and subsequently from U.C. Berkeley. Extremely well educated, she aspired to build a hospital in her father's native village and strived toward that goal in her life. In six years, she collected \$250,000, an amazingly large sum at the time, and established the Chungsan Benevolent Hospital in China. She later married a lifetime admirer, Charles King.

John Heinlen

Nothing ever revealed Heinlen's motive to lease land to the unpopular Chinese. Money did not seem to be the objective, since the \$1,500 monthly rent would hardly add to the man's formidable fortune. In the process, he actually took odds with the public for allowing his son to declare that he (the son) did not mind living next to the Chinese. Perhaps, his own background as a

poor German immigrant helped him to understand the Chinese's plight. It was unfortunate that all his family documents were lost after his family line ended with the death of all his children.

Sam Kee

Known as Big Tooth Sam, Kee was the notorious outlaw in Chinatown. As the leader of the Hip Sing Tong, he commanded his tong's war with the Bing Kong Tong. His sense of justice, however, did not match that of the courts. IN 1922, he was arrested for hiring two white youths to assassinate a rival gang member. He died penniless shortly after he was released.

Chinese-Americans of Today

Today, only the replica of Ng Shing Gung in San Jose Historical Museum reminds us of the Chinatown that once stood where the Fairmont Hotel is. Much of the present-day Chinese-American population in San Jose come from recent immigration, many of them unaware that a San Jose Chinatown existed. Different from the earlier Chinese settlers, the new population consists of mostly young and educated, middle-class families. And yet, they share the same determination and the perseverance to succeed. Moreover, they benefit from the earlier Chinese's fight for acceptance. The heritage of the Chinatown, however, should not be allowed to be forgotten. It was, after all, an ugly but important testimony to racial relationships in San Jose.

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