

The Historical Impact of Chinese-Americans on the Santa Clara County

Observing the Accomplishments of Three Important Figures

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Introduction

The Chinese-American population in the Santa Clara County has had a tremendous impact on the community's traditions, values, and history. The courage and persistence displayed by these people should be commended and publicized. Little is known of their mind-boggling ordeal and influence on American history. Though the population faced great discrimination, openly fierce persecution, and disrespect, they succeeded in achieving their many ambitions, dreams, and aspirations. The Chinese-Americans entered a land of vast opportunities and unlimited wealth; they made the best of their chances to prosper.

The following is a historical account of three great men who epitomized the bravery, hard work, and sacrifices the Chinese people endured and experienced. They were giants of their days - to both the minority and white populations. All three vitalized in the late 19th century and early 20th century; the men were industrious and opportunistic individuals in times of war and depression. Throughout the years, they maintained their loyalty to the states, their personal dignity and pride, and defended the country's honor. Above all, all three had an extraordinary impact on the history of the Santa Clara County.

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The Chinese-Americans constitute serves a sizable percentage of the Santa Clara County population, it is a segment that assumes a unique position of historic and significant proportions. The contributions of these great pioneers are endless yet relatively unknown; they have been a tremendously important component in the histories and communities of Santa Clara County. A general consensus has minimal knowledge of the cultural tradition and influences brought by the Chinese people. Little is known of the great and influential people who helped shape the American way of life in the valley. Therefore it appears imperative to exhibit and explore their undeniable effect on the society.

The first Chinese, two men and one woman, arrived on the American shores on February 1848, aboard the Brig Eagle from Hong Kong. The men immediately attacked the gold fields and the woman went to work in the home of a missionary named Charles Gillespie. By May 7, 1852, 11,780 Chinese men and 7 women had found their way to the gold fields of Northern California. The Chinese men were young, energetic men in the prime of life. They came to capture the California dream - not to pioneer and settle the frontier, but to strike it rich in the "mountain of gold." The Chinese planned to make the most of their opportunities, return to their motherland, courageous, affluent, and a hero to their society they left behind. Many of these Chinese prospectors entered other fields of activities such as laundries, railway construction, farming, and fisheries. One significant project completed by the Chinese was the construction of Stanford University. They have also advanced the world of medicine with their fascinating array of drugs and herbs.

Thousands of Chinese workers partook in a monumental and gargantuan objective under the Central Pacific Railroad. They became a "great army laying siege to nature in her strongest citadel. The rugged mountains were stupendous and godly" (Dixon 146). The Chinese were more responsible for connecting the country with railroads than anyone else. Though the Central Pacific estimated that between 500 to 2,000 Chinese casualties, the huge granite mountains were finally conquered by the sheer will of the Chinese workers. Their proficiency and aptitude in railroading was never questioned; in fact the Chinese set a new national record by laying out 10 miles of track in less than twelve hours. The completion of the transcontinental railroad (May 10, 1869) gave San Jose a boom equivalent to that of the Gold Rush. Real estate rose in value, and the construction of the public building increased measurably. The Chinese Americans made a rich contribution to the Santa Clara valley as well as the nation by courageously building a national railroad system.

The Chinese encountered strong opposition, obstacles concerning prejudice and blatant racism. Oppression and bans were enforced regularly; persecution and discrimination was abundant.

Groups of anti-Chinese were formed: Workingmen's Alliance, Supreme Order of Caucasians, People's Protective Alliance, Anti-Chinese Association, etc. The main purpose was to oust the Chinese from California and the United States.

Yet through their Herculean persistence and ability to adjust and adapt, the Chinese flourished in the Santa Clara Valley. The people helped build the Santa Clara County in more ways than just the physical construction of many buildings. They exhibited extreme fortitude and ingenuity to attain the American dream of prosperity and freedom to achieve their dreams. The following is a historical reference on three extremely important and influential Chinese men (in the Santa Clara County) who were great in their respective fields.

Henry Wong Him

Dr. Henry Wong Him was among the many early Chinese who contributed to the growth, development, and prosperity of the once small and quiet Santa Clara Valley. Little (acutally nothing) is known or documented of his youth or early life. The minute amount of information on this man surfaced from other people's observations, personal letters, and writings. However, his influence and impact on the Santa Clara Valley and Chinese population is undeniable.

Wong Him was an interesting man; a person whose life compelled many. Nevertheless, his time in the Santa Clara Valley can be concluded to be an important time for the Chinese population. Wong Him started his growth in the Santa Clara County area before 1900 by purchasing his 85 acres of the original 323 acres owned by Abraham Agnew, who used the land for agricultural purposes in the early 1800's. The doctor's farm was renown for not only its productive success but also a rare scene of beauty, harmony, and nature. The orchard and farmyard were meticulously tended and Dr. Wong Him, with his great individuality, had many wild fowl and wildlife around his farm. He additionally had beautiful gardens of zinnias, dahlias, and asters which were merely for his and other people's sighting pleasure (Chinn 148-149).

Wong Him's best and most well-known contribution to the county, besides the strangeness of his character, was "the great virtual monopoly" he had on the Chinese pear. On three of his 85 acres, the doctor had planted approximately 300 single pear trees of extremely rare variety. The flourishing growth of the pear trees were excellent, mainly because of the rich, moist sediment soils of the region. Later, Wong Him expanded his pear section to 10 total acres, making it the largest planting of that variety of pears in the United States. Wong Him brought these finely cultivated and succulent pears

to the Santa Clara population.

Dr. Wong Him also had prominent dealings in the Greater Bay Area and often entertained many important public figures in the early valley days. His guests were enchanted by the quaint gentleman with his many mannerisms. Wong Him sold his pear farm in 1933 to the State of California for the development of more buildings for the hospital. The land that was once his is now the land that the east wing of Agnew's State Hospital is situated on. He is known to be an accomplished Herbitist and it thought to have helped many people in the Santa Clara are over many illnesses and diseases with his great knowledge of herbs (Chinn 151).

Wong Him succeeded by exhibiting a tireless and determined work ethic. His individuality and originality has placed him among the high echelon of important individuals in the beginnings of the Santa Clara County. He proved that a Chinese could be as prosperous and rich as the white man, if given the opportunity and time.

Sing Kee

A giant in the Chinese population, Sing Kee, was born in January 25, 1895 in Saratoga. He was educated in San Jose institutions but returned to China in his late teens to be married. On returning to America, Kee left his wife and young child in China. He visited New York and enlisted with Company F, 306th infantry division on December 15, 1917. He was ordered to Camp Upton in New York and though he was the only Chinese in the company, his presence among his comrades was appreciated; Kee was a great favorite among his peers.

Kee's participation in World War I was the scene of extraordinary heroism and stoic bravery. Sing Kee became famous and was awarded the distinguished service cross for outstanding service and courageous valor in action. The honor was bestowed on October 12, 1918. General Pershing announced the award of 22 crosses to officers and enlisted soldiers. Private Sing Kee had refused to be evacuated with his regiment departing for France. Although he was seriously gassed during a terrible shelling of high explosive gas shells, Kee continued to operate, valiantly and single-handedly, the regimental message center and relay station with near Teutonic precision during the 14th-16th of August 1918.

A similar occurrence eventuated on the 20th of August. Sing Kee was sent to the 77th infantry division to join it as a replacement troop under the command of Major Thacker in the town of St. Juvin and Hill No. 82. Despite a disastrous mustard gas blitzkrieg by the Hun troops, Kee once again

continued to keep the crucial relays of runners moving with vital messages.

In refusing retreat, Kee solidified his reputation as being a "lion-hearted" man of phenomenal pride; he was honored as an American hero in the United States. Commander Colonel George Vidmer commended his soldier by praising, "Throughout this critical period, he (Kee) showed extraordinary heroism, high courage, and persistent devotion to duty, by his coolness and determination materially aiding the regimental commander in communicating with the front line." Kee had triumphed miraculously in the face of near-inevitable death and defeat; he was justly rewarded with a war hero's welcome.

The New York Sun lauded his accomplishments by printing: "With the battle scarred 77th or Metropolitan division - New York's own draft division swings up or down Fifth Avenue after nervous German fingers have signed a peace of allied victory. Run your eye down the line of veterans until you come to the 306th Infantry, and there jump along to the Second battalion. You will find him marching there, a man with skin close to the olive drab of his uniform. He is Private Sing Kee, the very first Chinese in the American fighting legions to be cited for extraordinary bravery, and unexplainably, for the present, he will be treading along with the proud New York fighters, although he had come all the way across the continent from San Jose, California, he look up, as the soldiers express it, with the 77th outfit" (Lee 102).

As a result of his injuries, Kee remained in the hospital for several weeks. He contacted his parents in California and was engulfed with a sense of joy, for they had heard of his great achievements. His father told newsman, "He is a good boy and I am proud of him. We hope he will come back soon, as we want to welcome him home again. He is a good American."

Sing Kee became the first Chinese in the history of the Chinese-American population to be decorated for war-time bravery. His heroic courage and determination underlined his pride and love for America. Since the war, Kee has continued his life in New York with periodic visits to his original home, Saratoga. He vitalized peacefully in the Big Apple until the late 1950's when he hit the newspaper again. Kee was charged on a felony charge (from the New York Court) accusing him of illegitimately bringing Chinese immigrants into the United States. This, though illegal, definitely proved his love for humanity and benevolence towards people with less fortunate lives. He wanted them to share in the abundant wealth of the great nation of independence, America.

Though Kee lived in the east coast the majority of his lifetime, he had tremendous impact and influence on the west coast (Santa Clara, especially). The Chinese population felt true gratitude and affection for their inspiring hero, a person who brought respect and adulation to the Chinese name.

Not only did he give Chinese-Americans something to be proud of, he gave the entire Santa Clara Valley a figure of national pride; a man who fought valiantly and stoically for the American way and dream. He gave the children, Chinese and Caucasian, a role-model type figure with characteristics of leadership, personal strength, and glory. He overcame racial adversary and reached his goal; his life should be an example to all loyal Americans. Kee can be idolized and similarized to a savior of sorts; a man who beat tremendous odds to capture glory and happiness while defending his nation's honor.

Thomas Foon Chew

After the era and excitement of the gold rush diminished, the city of San Jose began a rapid spurt in growth. The Chinese cheap labor forces had found the valley and were now noticing the plethora of orchards of Santa Clara. In 1860, the Chinese population numbered only 22, but 10 years later in 1870, the population had skyrocketed to 1,525. As the Chinese population increased the Santa Clara grew as the largest fruit industrial areas in the country. However, in the late 19th century, the small community of Alviso was the hub of bustling activity in Santa Clara County. This was the home of the Bayside Cannery, founded by Yen Chew before the turn of the century. Yen Chew operated a tomato-packing business.

In 1906, Chew brought his son Thomas Foon Chew into the family business and the business evolved drastically. In a matter of years Foon Chew was recognized as one of the most prominent of the Chinese people and an individual who made tremendous contributions to the Santa Clara County region. Through Foon's ingenuity and resourcefulness, and his ability in making the most of the facilities available to him, the small tomato canning operation transformed into one of the largest and most efficient canneries in the nation.

It was a strenuous and severely inclined uphill pull for Chinese to become respected citizens by the "white" community. The Chinese children were taught in their homes that they were strangers in another land and that they must work hard, be patient, and possibly even take abuse if they were ever to make a place for themselves in this country. Tom Foon utilized these words of wisdom and became a powerful example of that teaching. "During his time in California, Tom Foon was unquestionably the most respected Chinese. Besides untold business associations to which he belonged, he was the first Chinese to be accepted into the Masons and served as a Shriner in San Jose" (Bancroft 99-100).

Tom Foon received his initial schooling in San Francisco at a Chinese school. After completing his education at age 17, he joined his father to work in the cannery. Due to the innovative and progressive ideas of the brilliant Tom Foon, the cannery began a period of enormous growth that made the Alviso cannery the third largest in the United States. The other two were De Monte and Libby, both of which are still operating today and among the largest in the world. After the death of Yen Chew, Tom Foon inherited the cannery and under his individual leadership, the business continued expanding. The two main attributes that led to his prosperous success was his own intuitive intelligence and his ability to surround himself with competent, qualified people to enhance his own skills and take over where technical ability was essential.

Another fine quality of Foon proved to an important monetary asset; Tom had a knack for taking challenges with serious risks and turning them into great profits. In early 1929, in the heart the Great Depression, Tom Foon was granted a building permit for \$70,000 worth of improvements to the Alviso cannery. The advancements included a new warehouse 118 feet by 244 feet and 30 cottages to provide housing for his workers. These additions were serious risks for the declining condition of the stock market and the languished economy were apparent. However, the "new-and-improved" cannery paid giant dividends. Tom Foon's genius continued when he bought 180 acres near Yuba City that had never been farmed. "A neighbor there proclaimed that Foon was crazy to try to grow anything on that land. After closing the deal on the land, Foon went to a supply house in San Jose and bought 60 picks and shovels and a hearty supply of blasting powder. He, alongside 25 Chinese laborers, broke the ground loose with blasting powder and planted trees. He dug a well to irrigate the trees and ended up with the finest peaches in the valley. Similarly, he bought several hundred acres of land near Dos Palos which he put in rice" (Ping 112-113). He had also been told this land lacked fertility, but as usual the Foon persistence and wisdom proved successful.

In 1919-1920, Tom Foon hired a man whose inventive genius would prove to be one of his most valuable gifts. With the help and encouragement of Foon, William de Back devised and built the asparagus sorting and processing equipment that helped Foon earn the undisputed title of Asparagus King. Foon was the first to pack green asparagus. Having been packed white until then, people thought Foon was nearing the edge of sanity. Once again, despite opposition and pressure of failure, Foon succeeded in developing a modernized and more efficient method in accumulating asparagus. "At the peak of Bayside's operation, it is estimated that canning volume was 600,000 cases or more per year. This would convert to approximately 3,000,000 dollars per year, gross" (Ping 119).

Foon gave the Santa Clara population a financially-stable place to work during the Depression. Though these workers were usually unskilled, Foon would spend a great amount of time and effort in training any of the workers who showed promise and expressed a desire to learn. Santa Clara, with Foon at the industrial helm, survived the Depression and basked in the light of economic stability with his cannery. His benevolence and care for all different people - the Chinese, white, Irish, and the Spanish - and his attempt to work them together in unison must be applauded. Though racial tensions were great and discrimination was rampant, Foon put them together so they could learn about each other's various customs, traditions, and cultures. He, advanced intellectually and morally, was far ahead of his times in his beliefs of equal opportunity and integrated work forces.

February 24, 1931 was perhaps one of the most sorrowful and tragic days in Chinese-American history in Santa Clara. The Asparagus King had died. The San Jose Mercury wrote, "It was the largest funeral ever held in the city's (San Francisco) famed Chinatown. A service that brought forth 25,000 spectators to see Chinese and Americans alike pay homage to one of Oriental parentage" (Ping 123). Foon, suffering from pneumonia, aggravated by his asthma, died in O'Conner Sanitarium in San Jose at the age of 42. A delegation of over 200 S.F. Masons attended and participated in the services.

Foon was a great man, a historic individual with unparalleled loyalty, affection, filial piety, and utmost devotion. He overcame the prejudices and extensive obstacles during his life and became one of the most powerful and successful Chinese in Santa Clara history. His generosity and kindness affected thousands of people of both Chinese and American heritage. Tom Foon was equipped with an admirable trait of having an unending concern for the well-being of his fellow man. All the time he was prospering himself he was helping others. At no time did Tom Foon make a profit at the expense of another. He never broke his word; his promise was never questioned. In 42 short years, Foon vitalized life to its absolute fullest; he made a substantial contribution to the history of Santa Clara County. "His plight and deeds are relatively unknown but without doubt formidable. Foon created one of the most prosperous and largest canneries in the nation while encountering strong opposition from the white population. He helped the Santa Clara Valley become the affluent haven we know today" (Bancroft 68-69). For the Chinese citizens, he was a legendary giant in his day.

The three men mentioned left a powerful impression on the history of Santa Clara. They were great individuals who prospered gloriously in the wake of prejudice and racial impediments. They came to this great country with a shining dream in mind; the dream of wealth, respect, prosperity, and glory. The Chinese Americans encountered difficult adversaries in their plight towards this

dream. But with hard work and determined will, they realized that they could accomplish anything they set their minds to. Thus, their dreams and ambitions were reached. The Chinese population of Santa Clara has had a profound historical impact on the valley. Though little has been publicized about their accomplishments, the people of Chinese heritage represent individuals who contributed more than its share of interest to our growing community. The Chinese, with their traditions and institutions, shaped the sociological evolution of the valley.

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