

THE CHINATOWNS OF SAN JOSE

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INTRODUCTION OF SAN JOSE

The history of the Chinese community in San Jose is a subject that has long been overlooked by local historians. This lack of documented history has become apparent in recent years as the local Chinese have tried to establish their contribution to the fabric and fiber of the California and San Jose social scene and by local historical archaeologists who have discovered remnants of the Chinese material culture in their excavations. This has lead them to ask questions that historians have not yet begun to address.

These gaps in the archival records need to be filled by the archaeologist and the historian working in cooperation. But before the archaeologist can approach the subject, he needs the site and artifacts with which to work. The purpose of this paper is to outline a brief history of the Chinese population in San Jose and to locate their major habitation sites.

The Historical Method was used and an archival search of historical data was made at the local institutions housing reference collections. These were the San Jose State library, San Jose Public library and California Room and the document collection at the San Jose Historical Museum. Books written on the San Jose Chinese community are few. The major work to date is Chinese Argonauts edited by Gloria Hom. There are also two archaeological reports that briefly

address the history of the local Chinese. General histories about the Chinese in America and California were also consulted in addition to local contempor^{ary} records and newspapers.

During the mid-nineteenth century China endured famine, pestilence, wars and political unrest, and economic depression. This was especially true of the southeast provinces that were cut off from the mainland by a ridge of rugged mountains. This fact combined with the news of the discovery of gold in California sparked the great immigration of the Chinese to the American West.

Although the Chinese social structure discouraged emigration, the men were attracted to California as a source of economic opportunity to raise the standard of living for their families. The vast majority of the emigrants intended to stay only long enough to become rich and then return to their homeland.

By 1852, there were 11,000 Chinese in California, employed mainly in the gold fields but also finding work as laundrymen, house servants and cooks.¹ As the work in the mines decreased the Chinese found a ready market for their labors in the expanding economy of the young and growing state. The hardworking Chinese went to work on the railroads and other public projects, in the factories and in agriculture.

In the early years of Chinese immigration the Santa Clara Valley held little attraction. The few Chinese in

the area (22 in 1860) were laundrymen, servants, laborers and cooks.² As work on the transcontinental railroad came to an end and as farmers began to appreciate the industrious and inexpensive labor provided by the Chinese, the Oriental population of Santa Clara County had increased to 1525 by 1870.³

Since the agricultural needs were seasonal the farmer contracted his labor through a labor broker, such as Charley Sam Long, who ran a Chinese employment office on the corner of San Fernando and Market streets in 1870.⁴ If the local labor market became exhausted a letter could be sent to the Chinese Six Companies in San Francisco and in a few days additional workers would arrive.⁵

By 1875 the Chinese controlled the strawberry industry in the Valley. If a farmer wanted to grow strawberries, he first had to consult the Chinese who decided if the market could support additional production. If approved the farmer provided land and plants and the Chinese would do the planting, cultivating, harvesting and then deliver the crop to the white owner who marketed it and divided the the proceeds equally with the Chinese.⁶ The reason the situation was tolerated was because only the Chinese were willing to engage in the stoop labor necessary for this crop.⁷ In additon to strawberries the Chinese were also hired to harvest hops,⁸ seed,⁹ onions,¹⁰ and to work in the orchards. They were contracted to build local railroads, roads,¹¹ and to do land clearing for orchards.¹² The cheap and efficient labor was considered indispensable to the local industries.¹³

But in spite of the invaluable services the Chinese population provided during this period, there was a distrust and intolerance developing within the white community. During the 1870s, California suffered economic depression resulting in widespread unemployment for the laboring classes. The Chinese were willing to work at any menial job for low wages.¹⁴ In addition, he was very visible, different in custom, appearance and language. He became the scapegoat for the economic problems of the times.¹⁵ The growing outcry against the "barbarous heathen" made it politically advantageous to favor Chinese exclusion and controls, resulting in laws and legislation limiting Chinese freedoms and taxing their income.

The Chinese attitude toward the prevailing conditions was one of forbearance since his stay in America was only temporary. The illiterate laborer didn't understand the American system or the language and depended upon the Chinese merchant class to act as his protection from and his liason with the Caucasian world. Chinatown became an insulating buffer from anti-Chinese hostilities, but it was also a source of fellowship and economic and social services.¹⁶

Little is known about the early settlement patterns of the Chinese in San Jose. The San Jose Weekly Mercury reports the destruction of the Chinese quarters by fire in January of 1870. This early community was located at Market and San Fernando Streets. The article indicates that the Chinese section was considered a nuisance by many

but chastizes the firemen for their lack of enthusiasm in the performance of their duties.¹⁸ By February 1870, the paper reports:

...our Chinese population has moved since the fire to quarters on Vine Street on the Guadalupe River south of Santa Clara Street. They have erected some dozen wooden buildings and are getting ready to set up house keeping after the most approved Mongolian methods.¹⁹

In March sixty more frame tenements were being built by the Chinese in this location.²⁰ The 1872 map of San Jose indicates a Joss House, the center of Chinese worship, was located at Locust and Park Streets near the river.²¹ The Joss House is usually located in the midst of a thriving Chinese district.²²

In April of this same year, the newspaper announced that the "burnt district, lately occupied by the Chinese, had been leased by the proprietor of a wealthy San Francisco Chinese company for ten years."²³ It is at this location that the most well known of the early San Jose Chinatowns developed. Being conscious of the danger of fire and backed by San Francisco money, five brick buildings and Ah Fook's Chinese Theater were built at the intersection of Market and San Fernando Streets. This area became known as the "Brick Chinatown."²⁴ By 1884 the Vine Street Chinatown had disappeared, the only remnant being a Chinese washhouse facing San Fernando at Vine. The Market Street Chinatown had spread to encompass the entire block facing the Plaza.²⁵

By the 1880s the downtown business district was beginning

to expand southward along First Street. The presence of Chinatown interfered with the hoped for expansion and the downtown merchants disliked having their businesses backed against this "unsightly, unsanitary, ill-smelling" blight on the community.²⁶ The town council made several attempts to oust the Chinese and the local newspapers fanned the flames of anti-Chinese sentiment.²⁷ The police periodically made raids on the gambling dens and opium joints, especially at election times.²⁸ By 1887 the abatement of Chinatown was really approached in earnest and several plans were being explored, when on May 4, 1887 a fire conveniently broke out in Chinatown. The entire Chinese sector of the block was destroyed, but all the American businesses miraculously survived, due to the quick and heroic action by white firemen.²⁹ The circumstances and timing of the fire were suspicious, but no one was hurt, the major buildings were insured and Market Street was freed for the further development of San Jose.

The Chinese quickly set up temporary quarters on San Fernando and Vine Streets and across the plaza, on the west side of Market.³⁰ The new Market Street location became known as Mr. Hale's Chinatown, which consisted of three old adobes occupied by the Chinese until 1889.³¹ Many of the refugees relocated in San Francisco or in the many strawberry camps throughout the valley.³²

Within a month after the fire the Chinese were making plans to build a new Chinatown in San Jose, and the Americans

commenced plans to build the new city hall in the center of Market Island.³³

Two competing sites were chosen for the new Chinatown and were built simultaneously. The first site, located north of Taylor Street on the Guadalupe River, was leased by Ah Fook for ten years.³⁴ This location is commonly referred to as the "Woolen Hills Chinatown" due to the proximity of the hills at Hobson and San Pedro Streets.³⁵ Several references called this area "Big Jim's Chinatown." Big Jim was one of the wealthiest and most influential Chinese on the Pacific Coast. He erected a fruit cannery at this site which employed hundreds of Chinese. Due to a conflict between rival factions that lead to Big Jim's withdrawal and subsequent return to China, the cannery was closed after several years.³⁶

The site of the other new Chinatown was located between Fifth and Seventh Streets and Taylor and Jackson on land leased from John Heinlen. This proposed site caused quite a furor among the nearby white neighbors, but Heinlen stubbornly withstood the anger of these people and built brick tenements with proper sewer and waterlines for \$30,000.³⁷ As the Woolen Hills Chinatown went into decline, the residents moved into Heinlenville, as it became known. The San Pedro buildings were empty, eventually burned and the area was leveled by 1902.

In its heyday, Heinlenville housed 4000 Chinese and was the largest Chinese community in California outside of San Francisco. During the early twentieth century it

became notorious for its spectacular "tong wars." 38 The tong was a fraternal organization or secret society that developed into a type of protection racket for houses of prostitution and the gambling and opium interests. 39 Problems in San Jose developed when a rival tong moved into Heinlenville and demanded its share of the action. Chinatown took on the appearance of an armed camp as the tongs conducted an ^{on and} off and war until 1923 when the San Jose City government finally eliminated the unsavory element in Chinatown. 40

The Chinese estate continued to pay the taxes on the Chinatown property until 1931 when the property was sold and cleared for a San Jose City Corporation yard. This date marks the end of the Chinatown era in San Jose. By this time the Chinese were leaving the laboring class and being assimilated into the social framework of the community. As the younger generations became educated, learned English and to understand American ways, and as social intolerance passed into history, the social and psychological needs for the ghetto disappeared and with it a colorful segment of San Jose history. 40
history

This has been necessarily brief due to limitations in time and space. Although there is further archival research to be done, the historian's restrictions are apparent. The contemporary records are sketchy and biased by the prevailing attitudes toward the Chinese and much of the currently produced literature is far from objective, although in the opposite direction. It is evident that to gain a fuller

understanding of the local Chinese culture necessitates an interdisciplinary approach combining the findings of the historical record with those of the archaeologist.

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29. San Jose Mercury, May 5, 1887.
30. Scrapbook A, p. 122.
31. Sanborn Map, 1887 and 1889.
32. Gibson, p. 503.
33. Hom, p. 100.
34. Scrapbook A.
35. Sanborn Map, 1901.
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37. San Jose Mercury, June 10, 1887; and Assessment Rolls, 1888.
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