

Recalling Chinatown life in early 1920s

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

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This column continues the story of the Yee family, who came from a small village in southwest China, near Canton. In 1977, Ron Limbaugh interviewed Yee Ah Chong, the son of Yee Gim Wo, for the Vacaville Heritage project. Yee Ah Chong's recollections of a vanished world are preserved at the Vacaville Museum. - Editor

Yee Gim Wo had settled in Vacaville's Chinatown, where the family operated a small restaurant and noodle-making factory. Although Chinese immigrants in the early 20th century were not allowed to own or purchase land, by 1923 Yee Gim Wo had purchased his property. In day-to-day life, lack of citizenship might not be much noticed, but for any legal transaction, a birth certificate or other document was important. To purchase their house, the family was searched by the authorities and asked to prove that at least the children were American citizens.

Yee Ah Chong was born in Vacaville in 1901 and was thus a citizen of the United States. Yet, like most children, he was born at home, delivered by

Dr. Stitt, but not issued a birth certificate. Fortunately, Yee Gim Wo wisely provided his son with an affidavit several years later. Attested to by several prominent citizens, it could be used as a birth certificate. It was quite a lengthy document and read:

"We the undersigned, H. Bristow, Edward Fisher, R. Ramers and J. M. Miller, being first duly sworn each for himself and not one for the others, do pause and say that we are residents in the town of Vacaville, County of Solano, state of California, and have been such residents for more than twenty years past. We are personally well acquainted with and know Yee Yu (as Yee Gim Wo was called), commonly known and called Ah Tom.

"A native of China, also a resident of Vacaville for nineteen years past, residing therein with his family consisting of a wife, Fong She, and seven children, the children being born during his residence afore said, and we hereby certify the matter of the birth of Yee Ah Chong, son of the said Yee Yu, that the said Yee Ah Chong is a native son of the state of California, U.S.A., born therein as afore said and being fully entitled to all rights and privileges and benefits accorded a citizen of the United States of America, being by birth such citizen as afore said and being about eight years of age on date thereof. Vacaville, Jan. 21, 1910. Subscribed before R. H. Platt, Notary Public."

In Yee Ah Chong's case, his father had the affidavit registered with the county by F. C. McGinnis on Nov. 20, 1925. Yee Ah Chong's sisters on the other hand never had their affidavits registered. In later years, when they needed to prove their legal status as citizens, they had to find another group of friends and acquaintances willing to vouch for them.

Besides small restaurants and noodle-making operations, Chinese communities were also known for their laundries. These were typically run by a group of partners who shared the workload and the profits equally. Vacaville had the Quong Sing Chinese Laundry, located near today's McBride Senior Center. Ah Yee Chong remembered three or four men who washed the clothes.

Near the laundry stood an olive tree, which was forever connected in Ah Yee Chong's memories to the San Francisco earthquake of 1906. "I remember that distinctly," he recalled, "When San Francisco was on fire, we could see it blowing in the sky, so I said I was going to climb to the top of that tree and see it. I remember I climbed up that olive tree ... " He was 5 years old at that time.

The Quong Sing Chinese Laundry consisted of several large copper pots over open wood fires. Customers would bring in their dirty linen. "It would be sorted," recalled Yee Ah Chong, "and the contents marked on a long cloth strip 'One night shirt,' and the guy writes down one night shirt. 'Two pairs of socks' - two pairs of socks. One pajama, one or two shirts, and he marks that down on a little strip of (cloth) paper and that strip of paper is sewed on to your laundry. ... They run a great big needle through them (the laundry pieces) ... and tie this tag on and there it was. Things didn't get lost. It's quite a deal."

The marked laundry was bundled and then "thrown into this big vat of boiling suds. ... Cloth and India ink don't boil out. That's dumped in the big vat ...and they bring it out and they slap it on the table. They take a bamboo brush and brush it ... to scrape the dirt off ... They would scrub and turn around and slap it a few times, then brush, then slap and boy, there was not a mark on it when they got through. Then they rinsed them out and took them up and hung up in their dry yard ... "

After the laborious part of washing and drying the laundry, it needed to be ironed. This was done by four additional men. "When they (the dried laundry) were brought in, they had these coal stoves that they put irons on. They took six irons. They were anchored down to six stoves. They burnt coal. These cast irons stood like this on them, against the hot part of the stove. They had these big old mitts they grabbed ... I used to watch them go up there and take one hot (iron) off the plate and hope that it stays hot enough and if not get another one and hope that it stays hot enough. They rub a little paraffin on it. They had this big table. They iron everything on a table ... They lay the shirt on

the table and start on it and in two minutes it's ironed. They starch everything ... A beautiful job. They take these women's dresses in those days, you know, with all the flounces and pleats and everything. They did a beautiful job on them."

And finally, the laundry was picked up or delivered. "I know when I was a kid I used to go along with this fellow that delivered the laundry. He had a big bamboo basket that he carried on his shoulder. Tied up in packages ... Used to tell them how much it cost. It all depends on how fancy your folds are ... it's a dollar, dollar and a quarter."

Small restaurants were another part of Chinatown life. "(The Chinese were) great for restaurants, too ... little greasy spoon restaurants for working men. Most of these men were bachelors and a restaurant meal provided a nice alternative to the food on the ranches, which consisted mostly of rice and vegetables with little meat added."

Foods were simple here, too, "maybe roast beef, roast pork - short ribs Spanish. That's pork and beans ... fish on Fridays. And you go down to the place and maybe it's a greasy spoon, but ordinary working field hands can go and get a meal for twenty cents or two bits. You can't beat it. It's someplace to eat. Good hot biscuits and a lot of good food."

One restaurant still fondly remembered by Vacaville residents was the Sam Gum Moon restaurant on the corner of Kendal and Dobbins streets. A pick into its recreated interior is part of the Vacaville Museum's current exhibit, "A Long Journey."

Chinese cooks were also popular as employees with many settlers. Most ranches employed their own Chinese cook. Many of them remained with one family for decades. "That old Lee cooked for the Fred Buck family for thirty some odd years. Old Fred Buck died and the flu killed Mrs. Buck's son and his wife and the little boy, too. But it left him alone." When Mrs. Buck gave up the ranch, Lee finally returned to China after working for the Buck family for more than 30 years.

Another long-term cook was "the old Yee" who cooked on the Pierce ranch in Suisun Valley for three generations. "He owned that place. You didn't just walk into his kitchen. You ate what he fixed."

My next column will finish Ah Yee Chong's stories of life in Vacaville's Chinatown.

The Vacaville Museum's current exhibit "A Long Journey," explores the story of the Chinese community in Solano County. The museum is open from 1 to 4:30 p.m. Wednesday through Sunday.

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