

Culture clashes challenged Chinese

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 this vanished world are preserved at the Vacaville Museum. - Editor

At the turn of the 20th century, the Chinese community in Vacaville congregated along Dobbins and Kendal streets. Their businesses provided goods, services and a place where the many bachelors working in the orchard industry could relax among their fellow Chinese.

Besides the small restaurants and noodle shops, entertainment flourished. Foremost among them were the Chinese lottery games. Ah Yee Chong remembered the complicated procedure.

"You get a little sheet of paper and there were eighty characters on it ... divided in the middle ... forty at the top and forty at the bottom. ... On an average ticket, you might make ten marks on the ticket ... "

At the lottery station, those 80 numbers were pasted on a board. The numbers would randomly be divided into four bowls, containing twenty each.

"Those were taken off, that little two inch square thing ... and they were folded up in a ball and put in a big tub and with a big spatula were swirled over, and then somebody handed out four numbers.

"Somebody in the crowd picked out one and opened it up and it was number four bowl, so they kept number four bowl and read it off and stuck it (the twenty numbers in the bowl) up on the board again. ... If you got five of your ten marks you get paid, you get money back." And the more correct numbers marked, the higher the prize, until "if you get ten out of ten, you break the bank."

There were different varieties of games and different levels of plays. Cost varied from an affordable 10 cents up to 10 dollars. Lottery drawings occurred twice a day, in the afternoon and in the evening.

Everybody played the lottery, according to Ah Yee Chong. "My father, before he got too

crippled up, I used to walk with him when I was a little kid. When he could find a buck, he'd hire a cart - a horse and a cart from the livery stable and go around to these five ranches and sell tickets. ... Everybody played, the ranchers and the whites."

And occasionally, somebody did break the bank. "There was a Yee family had a store in town ... His grandson came over here (sometime in 1918) ... he had my sister mark the ticket for him ... and by gosh, he broke the bank for a thousand dollars. Of course he came to this country to make a fortune. He gave my sister a hundred dollars. The next week he was gone back to China. He had his money."

Besides the lottery, other popular games of chance were played, all offering that elusive gamble to gain wealth quickly. Ah Yee Chong remembered some of the security measures taken by the operators to evade being caught.

"Every afternoon why they called - about four o'clock you could hear that fella get up and out into the street and holler 'Already now come on and gamble.' When we was little kids, why they was paying ten cents to even be the watchmen. We sit there and we have a loose nail in the wall and when the cops come around the corner we reached back and pushed that nail. (That nail was connected to) a bell. Brrr. A buzzer, you see. Down come the doors. The doors are made from two by twelves and was barred with two two by fours. Well, by the time you chopped that door open they've got that stuff out the back door and were gone."

Here, cultures clashed. While gambling was illegal in the United States, "Chinese don't understand it, because to them gambling is a way of life. No more than your going out and playing bridge for two bits a corner."

There rarely was much money involved. "Really big (gambling) money left the town," recalled Ah Yee Chong. "The gambling among these little farmers was maybe a dollar or two dollars, maybe five dollars."

Another cultural difference was the use of opium. According to Ah Yee Chong, "The Chinese use opium like a white man uses (alcohol). ... They smoked opium moderately. They wake up in the morning and smoke a pipe or two, They get up, eat breakfast, and they scrape the pipe out ... They mashed it up with rice and make little pellets out of it. And they take that with them and they taken one once in a while and they wait till noon and they come home, eat their noon meal and sit down and have a pipe full and go back to work."

The amounts smoked were minimal: "It's so small that you can smoke the whole thing in one drag ... They didn't do it like these guys and get stoned on it."

The opium, bittersweet in flavor, produced “a nice, easy feeling,” making the smoker a bit sleepy. The small amount ensured that this feeling only lasted an hour or so.

Several merchants in Chinatown carried opium. Produced in China, it was a reasonably affordable commodity: “If he’s fairly moderate (in usage), maybe a dollar and a half a week.” It was sold in tiny bone boxes, tightly capped, that could be refilled at the store.

Among the many traditions that Chinese residents brought to Vacaville was their knowledge and usage of herbal medicine. While there was no trained doctor, the community had two herbalists (Ah Yee Chong called them herbists) who sold herbs. Like most Chinese, Ah Yee Chong’s parents used herbal teas to treat simple ailments at home. “You tell them (the two herbalists) what is wrong and they would give you the right kind of herb. My father and my mother were brought up that way - they knew about sickness and what to do for it. If you have something wrong with you and you have a fever, well, you go down there and you tell them you want a package of this kind or a package of that kind and they would stew it up.”

Most of these teas are concoctions of a large number of different herbs, brewed up in a long process, resulting in a concentrated, potent liquid.

With more serious illnesses, a doctor from San Francisco might be seen, or even called to Vacaville. Ah Yee Chong remembers the flu epidemic of 1918-19, which affected his immediate family. His younger sister contracted the flu and nearly died from it.

“She was three days in bed, and she was out of her head most of the time,” he recalled. “They couldn’t do anything for her, so in sheer desperation my mother said, ‘I had it too, and so had my brother. You get out of bed and you go to the telephone office, and you call up the (herbal store) in San Francisco, and you tell them you want a doctor ... to come to Vacaville, immediately, any way he can get there.’ So I called up and the next morning, he came down. A fellow charged a hundred dollars to bring him down in a Cadillac. So he looked my sister over ... and her fire is pretty near out, but he said he’d take a chance and he wrote down the herbs he wanted and I took them to the telephone office and ... they immediately got the same fellow to bring the herbs down. He put the herbs on to stew and he cooked them all that day and all that night. ... He boiled them down to no more than five or six cups. God, it was rank. So they propped my poor sister up, ... and spooned it down in her. She was almost unconscious... My mother kept spooning it in her. We got about a cup in her, and of course, we had to take a half cup, my brother and I. Oh God, it was bad. It was so hot you couldn’t just gulp it down. You had to sip it. Oh, it was rough. My sister woke up the next morning with a clear head. He stayed there and gave a couple more shots. In a week’s time, she got out of bed and was walking around. The Chinese never lost one person with herbs.”

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

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