A look into vanished world of Chinatown

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

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For decades in the late 1800s and into the 20th century, a small Chinese community flourished in Vacaville along Dobbins Street.

In Vacaville’s Chinatown, in Suisun Valley’s Big Camp, in Locke and other places, Chinese immigrants created a life based on familiar customs brought from China.

These communities typically were housed in cramped quarters. The immigrants prepared and served traditional foods, used Chinese herbs, enjoyed time-honored entertainments such as the lottery, worshipped in small Josh houses, and took care of their families according to time-honored customs.

This column finishes the story of the Yee family, who came from a small village in southwest China, near Canton. Ron Limbaugh interviewed Yee Ah Chong, the son of Yee Gim Wo, for the Vacaville Heritage project in 1977. His interview, sharing Yee Ah Chong’s memories of a vanished world, and recalled below, is preserved at the Vacaville Museum.

Religion played a central role in daily life. According to Yee Ah Chong, most immigrants were Taoists rather than Buddhist. According to popular Chinese beliefs, there is a pantheon of gods, or spirits from all traditions called shen chiao, all involved in everyday life to bring blessings or calamities. Every object of daily life has its presiding spirit needing to be consulted and feasted or driven off, especially at special occasions in the life of the family or the community.

Ah Yee Chong’s memories of his mother praying to a variety of house gods reflected these folk beliefs.

“See, the Chinese homes were full of gods. The main one is the parlor God, but it isn’t as important as the kitchen God, ‘cause it watches over the kitchen and sees that you get food and things like that. Homage was paid to those gods about once a month. Mother would cook a little chicken, and we’d have some rice and some tea and a glass of liquor and I’d help her carry the tray ... Then we’d light the candles and the incense and get down and bang our heads (bow the head to the ground) and scrape a little tea on and take it to the next one.

“My mother (said special prayers), but we didn’t ask about them. The Chinese don’t
ask very much. I know I heard her time and time again pray that there would be peace in the world and that no sickness would come to our little family. That’s all she ever said. She never asked for anything else.”

Vacaville had one small so-called Josh house that served the community as a central place of worship. The Chinese community raised the money for it.

The inside of the Josh house, a wood building, “was dark as the ace of spades, no light ... One carbon globe burning up there so fly-specked it might as well be nothing.” It was a wood building. “I guess there was a shrine almost as big as that wall sitting up there. There was an altar in front ... The altar was quite fancy, with a picture in the middle, like that mirror - all with wood-carved work - quite a beautiful thing.”

Young Ah Yee Chong accompanied his mother on her visits to the Josh house. In his interview, he repeatedly stressed the open nature of the Taoist religion. The religion “... it’s universal, really. Some of those Josh houses may have a shrine for Buddha and you tolerate it. ... It’s open to the public.”

Praying rituals involved either the purchase and burning of prayer papers or an elaborate way of selecting the page number in one holy book for advice. “... a lot of people go in there to ask their God for luck to see whether it’s propitious or not to go into business. You know these little sticks when they shake the newspaper again, well that’s not a game in Chinese. He goes into a Josh house and he buys a packet of incense. That helps keep the place going, and he lights the incense and he gets down and prays and throws something that shows him how to shake those sticks out and refer to the book. That’s religion. That isn’t playing. To the American, that be playhouse, but it isn’t, that’s religion.

“It’s a bamboo stick about so long and in kind of a silver thing, and each one of those sticks is numbered with a page in that book and you get down and bump your head on the floor three times and you take this thing that looks like a castanet and you throw it down and it opens up and it shows you which one of these cylinders to take.

“It was written on one or the other side of it and whichever number comes up you take that cylinder and you pick that up and shake it and one falls out, you see. You read that one and you turn to that page in the book and that shows you whether this is a propitious day to do something or not.”

Besides being the spiritual center of the community, the Josh house also served as a last refuge for old or dying men who did not have families to take care of their needs.

“Now in most small towns a place like a Josh house, it’s also like an old man’s home
or a poor man’s home, so you go there to die. They usually have a couple of rooms in
the back or they have a cellar like in Vacaville they had a big cellar. Well, I’ve seen so
many old men in my days pack up and move down in the basement of the Josh house.
They couldn’t work anymore and they used what they had left for food and before long
they starved to death. They called it the benevolent society, that’s what they called it.”

Nobody took care of the elderly men coming to the Josh house to die. Nor were there
any priests. “If he is an old man and if he can still get around, like my mother used to
give this old fellow two or three dollars once in a while to buy groceries with, because
he used to take care of all of us kids ..., He’d go down and gamble at the corner
sometimes and maybe he’d make fifty cents a day and he’d quit. He may have
enough to buy himself some rice with and that’s all. Of course after he dies he’s never
buried in a pauper field. The Chinese aren’t. The (conscription) book comes out and
everybody in town contributes to his funeral.

“You write your name down and how much you want to give, maybe fifty cents, or
maybe a dollar. The Yee family usually gave a couple of dollars or something like that.
If that isn’t enough, then the county takes care of him.”

The Josh house caretaker had charge of the conscription book. “He arranged for things
for Memorial Day, to take out to the cemetery. ... He didn’t get any pay, but he got to
live there free.”

“Some old fellow in town would accompany (the dead) down there (the cemetery).
He’d burn his things for him. That is something, too, that I’ve got to tell you about, but
it’s a very simple matter, you see, somebody would take a brick and write his name
on it and put it on top of the coffin. You know that’s funny, that brick with that India ink
on even after sixty years the name is still there - just as clear as anything.”

This was done for anybody who was buried - an inscribed stone on top of the coffin.
“When you dig up the bones you know how it was. I’ve seen those big coffins that
have been down for sixty years and brush the dirt off and it’s just like they wrote on
yesterday. I remember when they put the Northern Electric track from Suisun to
Vacaville, they had to cut through the cemetery, part of the Chinese cemetery. So they
dug up some of the bones and removed them and most of them were shipped back
home, but there was always a brick in there…

“The cemetery land was given to them. They had to be buried someplace. Years ago
the Vacaville cemetery was on that hill there and surrounded on three sides by grain
fields in the eighties and nineties. The Chinese in this country when anybody dies their
few possessions are burned. They take them out to the cemetery and burn them.
Along with this money, paper money, an offering and a little ceremony goes with it. It invariably set the countryside on fire. All that grass and dry weeds just go up in fire. So they run them out of Vacaville, They wouldn’t let them have them anymore so they went to Fairfield you know with the provision that they would burn in an incinerator. It’s there yet. You can drive around and see the old incinerator sitting there yet. It’s in Fairfield near the Suisun cemetery.”

The community gathered for a burial ceremony. “To the Chinese the burial ground is a mission. I don’t know what a burial ground in China is; to us it’s still a mission. Because in the old days, everybody got buried in a mission… like in the early California days.”

Papers and incense sticks were burned and the ceremony ended with a large food offer, often a roast pig, which would then be eaten in a communal feast. The pig was bought by conscription. “a piece of the roast pork was quite a treat and you didn’t get it many times a year unless somebody would go to San Francisco maybe and bring back a few pounds “People would sign up and pay for the amount of pork they wanted, thus raising fifteen to twenty dollars.”

To this day, descendants of the early Chinese community gather at Rockville Cemetery on Ching Ming, traditionally in early April, to honor their ancestors and to feast on Chinese delicacies, including the roast pork.

The Vacaville Museum’s current exhibit “A Long Journey,” explores the story of the Chinese community in Solano County. The Museum is open Wednesday through Sunday, 1 p.m. - 4:30 p.m.