

## Chinese a vital part of Solano history

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In the 19th century, many Chinese, most of them from Southeast China, came to America's western shores seeking their fortunes. The greatest influx came when they heard of the discovery of gold in California.

During this era, many Chinese and others found disappointment in the gold fields, and were attracted to Solano's rich farm land.

The Chinese, mainly bachelors or men whose families remained in China, found work farming and fishing. As towns formed and the Chinese population increased, a number of businesses operated by Chinese were started. That was followed by the growth the "Chinatowns" in Vacaville and Vallejo and a major settlement in Suisun Valley.

A great number of Chinese arrived in Solano County when work became available building the railroads from 1868 on. In the late 1880s, Chinese laborers were being recruited to build and maintain the levees on Grizzly Island.

When the work with the railroads was done, many found work in the orchards in the Suisun and Vaca valleys. Others thrived as fishermen and found work in the canneries at Collinsville and Rio Vista. Chinese laundries prevailed in Suisun City, Vacaville, Vallejo and Benicia and undoubtedly other areas of the county. There is information that some Chinese were employed as cooks in local hotels and restaurants.

The official Chinese population in 1860 was 14. By 1870, the numbers had increased to 920 and in 1890 increased to 1,522. But by 1900, the effect of an Exclusion Act passed by Congress caused the number of Chinese in the area to drop to 903. The Chinese exclusion acts represented a policy to ban immigration and curtail the Chinese from gaining citizenship. Unfortunately, much anti-Chinese sentiment was evident in the society. Even some newspaper editors were encouraging people not to patronize the Chinese laundries. By the close of the 19th century, the majority of Chinese had gone elsewhere.

Nevertheless, the Chinese did prosper during the 1800s in Solano County and the history of this county includes the legacy of these early pioneers. The following outtakes give us some picture of their life in that time.

In 1855, a respected, hard working Chinese gentleman, who lived and worked at

Benicia's Solano Hotel was taken by force to San Francisco by a member of a Chinese Secret Society. The society's house in Benicia had already been broken up, but apparently some were still active and had lodged complaints to the San Francisco group that this man had in some way disobeyed their mandates.

In 1857, there was a marble and lime quarry located between the Suisun and Laguna valleys. Of the 10 or 15 men employed in the quarry, most were Chinese.

In 1858, a Mr. Davis of Solano County introduced a resolution in Sacramento for the establishment of a Chinese Bureau that would be responsible for having tax forms and other important papers translated for the Chinese population

As with all groups of people, the Chinese had problems with prejudice. In 1858, a fire was set in Benicia in what had once been the City Hotel but had been turned into a rental for a group of Chinese. Fires of this nature were set to "wash out" the tenants; that is they were "washed out" when the fire brigade arrived with its hoses and buckets of water. The setting of the fires was strongly condemned by the newspaper and they demanded the culprits be punished.

Samuel Martin, a successful cattleman in Green Valley, hired a German architect, German stone cutters and Chinese laborers, who were paid a dollar a month, to build his home in 1861.

In 1863, the Solano Herald reported that: the firm of Ah Mong & Co. of the "Celestial Empire" (China) had commenced work on the reclamation of tule land in the vicinity of Suisun. Ah Mong, owner and captain of the fishing schooner Koang-wan-tse-dam-ye, was said to have long been interested in the importance of fisheries in that area. Now he intended to raise chickens, ducks and pigs while he continued his trade as a fisherman.

In 1863, the Eagle Hotel in Suisun City was available for rent. It was noted that it was common knowledge in town that this hotel had been used as a Chinese brothel in the recent past.

The Chinese sometimes found themselves involved in matter involving the courts. It was in 1863 that a man by the name of Lowe appeared in Justice Miner's court in Suisun. Lowe was charged with committing an insult upon the person of a fellow "Chinaman." This case went before a jury who decided in favor of the defendant Lowe.

By 1866, the fruit growers in the Vaca and Pleasants valleys were employing Chinese labor to cultivate and harvest fruit. It has been documented that many Chinese arrived

in this country with scrolls that contained information on the planting, pruning and packing of fruit. Their expertise is recognized as being vital in the growing prosperity of the orchards.

In 1865, the steamer Yosemite left the wharf in Rio Vista with a large group of Chinese laborers. Almost as soon as it pulled away from the dock, flames engulfed the steamer. The passengers were burned by scalding steam and this tragic accident resulted in 120 deaths.

In 1870, a Chinese laundry was established in Vacaville around Dobbins Street. A second laundry soon followed. This area would become the site of a major Chinatown.

In 1870, a census taken in Suisun City shows that there were six Chinese laundry men and seven clothes washers. The Chinese also fished the Suisun Bay and were regarded as great fisherman.

The principal industry in Collinsville was a salmon cannery established in 1873. During the season the cannery ran day and night, turning out about 20,000 cans a day. Of the 180 men employed to work inside the cannery 100 were Chinese. In addition to this group, least 100 more Chinese were fisherman.

Maine Prairie was a town that flourished as a shipping port, but faded with the arrival of the rail. A letter from a Maine Prairie resident who was leaving the dying area in 1875 contained this text: "No longer will I be able to sail down the fair bosom of the peaceful water of Cache Slough, and buy fish from Chinese fishermen and on our return swear we ketched every one of them."

In 1876, another Chinese laundry was established in Suisun City. There was always a huge Fourth of July celebration at the plaza for which the laundries supplied the fire works.

In the New Year, 1878, the newspaper reported the burials for the past year in Rio Vista; 117 Caucasians, 17 Chinese and four Catholics.

Beginning in 1878, Chinese laborers were brought in to work on the Northern Railroad between Benicia and Suisun City. The laborers lived in a big tent on the edge of Suisun City.

In the mid to late 1880s, Chinese laborers arrived at Grizzly Island to build levees. Resident Jack Soares recalled the Chinese "boss man," Sam. Sam made trips to San Francisco returning with "as many as 300 men at a time!" They were paid 25 cents a day. Sam pocketed 10 cents, so each worker received only 15 cents. The men worked

almost year round, building and maintaining levees. They camped out in the fields or lived in local farmers' barns.

A story reached the newspapers when the barkeeper of the Pittman Hotel at Bridgeport (a.k.a. Cordelia) got in a fight with the Chinese cook and was cut on the head. Because of the severity of the cut, the cook was put in jail.

In Rio Vista, a popular chef was buried with his prized butcher knife.

Life, as described in Vacaville's Chinatown, no doubt reflects how it was in Vallejo, the Suisun Valley and other areas.

There was no Chinese herb doctor in Vacaville, but there were herbalists who supplied concoctions for various ailments.

Traveling scribes would visit town periodically to write and read letters from family and wives in China.

Benicia's Washington House was used for a Chinese lottery at some point in history. Though the lottery was not legal, it was an ever popular pursuit in the communities. Everyone bought the tickets; town folk, ranchers, and, of course, the Chinese. The lotteries were very informal, just four or five men getting together and putting in \$100 apiece for prizes.

The Chinese community was a bachelor society for two reasons. It was almost impossible to get women through immigration, except for the Chinese prostitutes who were sponsored by business entrepreneurs. Secondly, it was rare for women to get permission to leave China. Historians have concluded that the ruling class wanted to make sure the money made in America was sent back to China.

A Joss House - a place of worship - was eventually founded in Vacaville. The old men would move into the basement when they could no longer provide for themselves. The basement area became known as the Benevolent Society. No one in particular took care of these men, but different people in the community stopped in and gave them two or three dollars at a time, enough to get by.

Funerals were considered very important. Everybody contributed in a big way toward the funerals of any Chinese person. There were no pauper fields for the Chinese. They took care of their own. Feb 3 - Feb 28. A special exhibit depicting Chinese Heritage in Solano County's will be on view at the Vacaville Chamber of Commerce at 300 Main Street. Open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. weekdays. This exhibit is courtesy of the Chinese American Association of Solano County (CAASC) and Masterpiece Memoirs

(Biographies-Oral Historys-Family Journals). Admission free. Also available for sale is a magazine, a limited publication, on the Chinese history in Solano County.

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