

Chinese pioneers make it big at 'Big Camp'

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Sunday, February 16, 1997

Information for this article came from material written by Peter Leung of the Asian American Studies at the University of California, Davis and Tony Water, a doctoral candidate at U.C. Davis' Sociology Department. All portions of this unpublished work "Chinese Pioneer Farming Families in Suisun Valley, California" are copyrighted by Peter Leung and Tony Water.

Big Camp was a Chinese farm labor community located on the A.T. Hatch Ranch in the Suisun Valley. This community once boasted a population of as many as 1,000 people. Though few photographs remain of "Big Camp," people who were there recorded that it featured an association building, clapboard farmhouses, fruit drying ovens, stable yards, stores, meeting and ancestor halls, gambling rooms and even an opium den secreted in the banks of the Suisun Creek.

The community's roots went back to 1871. It was then that Hatch, whose fortune came from the Nevada silver mines, purchased a ranch in the Suisun Valley. This land originally was settled by Charles Peabody in 1851. Hatch immediately hired a cook and houseboy, a 18-year-old Chinese immigrant. This young man's name was Chun Tim.

California pioneer Chun Tim, born in 1853, made his voyage to San Francisco at age 18. His daughter recalled his reminisces about his arrival in the growing West: "He thought that everyone was going to mine gold, but it wasn't that easy. Working on the railroad was not good either. He wanted to learn English so he might have a better life in the future." It is unknown how Hatch located Chun Tim, but it is recorded that Chun Tim was hired in 1871. He learned English and became quite valuable to Hatch.

Chun Tim proved to be a dedicated worker and in time was recruiting Chinese labor and acting as foreman on the ranch. Unlike other Chinese bossmen who found their pools of labor from immigrants already in California, Tim recruited from his home village, Gong Bui in the Loong Doo district, Zhongshan, Kwangtung. His daughter explained: "At first he worked with Mr. Edward, an American foreman, who came to see Chun Tim once in a while and told him what to do. Chun Tim brought lots of Chinese over from China to work at Hatch Ranch. Mr. Hatch encouraged the Chinese workers to build their own houses which eventually evolved into "Big Camp."

Male workers came alone without wives or families, so rather than build separate house, the men lived in bunkhouses. These were described as long wooden sheds with

small windows and built-in bunks beds. The far end of these sheds were designated as the cooking areas. Here the company's cook would set up a huge wok over a wood fire. In some cases this simple arrangement would serve to feed as many as 100 men.

In time Chun Tim not only recruited Chinese labor for the Hatch Ranch, but was lining up labor for other nearby ranches as well. And so the Chinese labor evolved in the area. Evelyn Lockie who grew up on a Suisun Valley farm recalled, "In the Suisun Valley, practically every ranch had a 'Chiny' cabin, usually kept for the boss man."

As the labor boss on the Hatch Ranch, Chun Tim was the central person in the Chinese farm worker's life. In large part the workers dealt with the labor boss because most of them did not speak English and so could not deal directly with the land owner even if they were inclined. This separation between worker and land owner also reflected the concern of the local white community to maintain a racially segregated society. It reflected as well a desire of the Chinese to maintain their cultural institutions.

In Chun Tim's role as labor boss, he was expected to hire, fire, maintain discipline and mediate any labor negotiations with the rancher. But in addition, as was the Chinese tradition, Chun Tim was not only seen as a labor boss but also as a respected "big brother." He was called upon to settle disputes and protect workers from thieves.

Chun Tim's daughter noted: "My father was very kind. Everybody trusted him. Whenever there was an argument, they brought it to 'Big Brother Tim' and he solved everything for them. He was well respected in the whole camp."

Hatch became one of the largest and most successful growers of deciduous fruit in the state. By 1910 there were some 1,000,000 fruit trees in the Suisun Valley with the greatest number belonging to the Hatch Ranch. Peaches, pears, prunes, apricots, cherries and almonds were all thriving.

It is recorded that in 1889 the California Fruit Transportation Co., in conjunction with Hatch and Frank McKevitt, was the first to experiment by shipping a carload of fruit back East on the new refrigerator car. Much of Hatch's success in the fruit industry may be directly credited to Chun Tim and the other Chinese workers he was to employ. The importance of the Chinese workers in the orchards was described in the Pacific Rural Press, 1893: "The Chinese are the mainstay of the Orchardist and thus far, it must be said, form the only supply of labor on which he can depend. They are expert pickers and packers of fruit. It is difficult to see how our annual fruit crop could be harvested and prepared for market without the Chinaman."

The Chinese population at Big Camp hit its zenith during the first decade of its founding. Then the Chinese stopped arriving in 1882 when the Chinese Exclusion Act

was passed limiting immigration for a period of ten years.

Most of the Chinese had come to America had a plan, often the same general plan: To make enough money to return to China, pay a handsome dowry and work on family lands. Even if this plan changed and they decided to stay in America, most still looked to China for their brides. As few women were allowed to immigrate, most of the men made that long voyage back to China to secure a bride. Chun Tim was one of the few to find a bride in California.

Tim made regular trips to San Francisco. In the early days, he drove a one-horse surrey to the city for shopping and church services. It was from these trips that he found his bride. His daughter told how her father and mother met. "After Chun Tim had worked for Mr. Hatch for about 20 years, he wanted to go back to China to start his family. He went to San Francisco for rice and Chinese food at a shop called Wo Kee, where eventually he met his wife-to-be."

Chun Tim's daughter-in-law elaborated. At age 34 in the year 1887 when Chun Tim was making preparations to return to China to select a wife: ". . . a brewmaster from San Francisco's Chinatown learned of his quest and introduced him to his 17-year old daughter, Ding Shee, who came to San Francisco when she was six. They were married and Chun Tim moved his bride to the 'wilderness' of Suisun Valley. Ding Shee was the only Chinese woman for miles around in 1887, but, despite that fact, she remained cheerful and helpful. Because of her optimistic outlook she was a great inspiration to her husband and her family. The success of these small group of Chinese attracted others. Soon a bona fide Chinatown existed at the edge of the Suisun Creek on the Hatch Ranch."

The couple's first daughter, Moy, was born in 1887. She was the first child of Chinese ancestry to be born in the Suisun Valley. But more memorable was when Chun Tim's first son, Chun Mon Gum, was born in 1890 on the Hatch Ranch. The whole Chinese community was elated, but Tim was, naturally, the most elated to have a son to carry on the family name.

At the turn of the century throughout California the original Chinese pioneer men had grown old and were dying off. Many had failed to marry, so only small groups of families were established. Those who could afford it returned to Loong Doo to find wives. While some remained in China, others returned. Some arranged marriages for those who could not make the trip. That, however, does not always mean these women were able to overcome the many restrictions invoked on entering the United States. As a consequence, at the turn of the century only three families were listed in Suisun Valley.

Of Chun Tim's children, only his third son, Youie, born in 1895, stayed in farming. In

1913, at age 18, Youie began managing the Baldwin Ranch, but his farming days were interrupted with the outbreak of World War I and he was inducted into the military. In 1919, he was returned and began managing the Scholl Ranch operation. Although Youie was still living at Big Camp, the majority of the workers he hired for the Scholl Ranch were Caucasian.

The workers would purchase the basics; Prince Albert tobacco was one of those basics. As foreman, it was Youie's responsibility to maintain the accounts for the store. Needs were also met by traveling peddlers. Youie's daughter, Roberta Tim Quan, spoke of this: "We rarely needed to go to town to purchase food as so many traveling peddler wagons arrived at our doorsteps. I can recall the fish wagon, a meat truck, and a vehicle filled with delicious baked goods. Everyone carried a variety of convenience items as well. I would save my coins and purchase a 10-cent box of Cracker Jacks for the coveted prize inside."

Julian Timm, Youie's nephew remembered Big Camp as it had evolved in the 1920s. "We moved to a very small house in a settlement which was originally started by Grandfather Tim. It was large and was called 'Dai Cum' translated as 'Big Camp' and was located adjacent to the Suisun Creek. I grew up in the Suisun Valley, which at that time had many Chinese from the Loong Doo region. . . . I remember the farm where my father Sam worked was staffed year round by about 10 workers from the Loong Doo region. In the summer during the fruit picking, cutting and drying, migrant Portuguese and Spanish speaking families also swelled the work force."

Julian Timm also recalled a time when his mother, after a long stay in San Francisco, returned to find she was without a home: "Our resourceful mother found that there was an empty wooden gas station that was clean and habitable and she thought it would be a nice house if repaired. With my Uncle Gum's permission it was bought for \$25 and moved to Uncle Gum's farm. . . . Like an old time barn raising, all the Chinese farm workers came by and helped raise the structure. In appreciation my mother fed them all a big dinner."

John Tim, Chun Tim's grandson, was born at Big Camp in 1927. When he was a child there was not much to do. He recalled: "We didn't have radio, no telephone. All we got was the newspaper. But my grandmother would tell us Chinese fairy tales and old time stories sitting next to the stove after dinner. My grandmother came from China in about 1868 when she was six years old. Before she got married, she earned a living by sewing at home in San Francisco."

Chun Tim died in 1923. His son, Youie took his father's body back to China for burial in the family shrine. While in China, he found a pretty young bride for himself. Jennie was 16-years old when Youie first visited her family home. She was told this was to be her

husband and Youie took her to the Suisun Valley in 1924. So it was that this young girl found herself living in a clapboard house in the small Chinatown on the Hatch Ranch. And although there were only three families living at the Hatch Ranch, there were as many as 20 Chinese families residing at nearby ranches.

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