

The Depression shuts down Big Camp

By Kristin Delaplane

Sunday, February 23, 1997

Born in China, Chun Tim arrived in San Francisco in 1871 at the age of 18. His role as a pioneer in the Suisun Valley was noted in the 1938 memoirs of Rosa Lee Baldwin who lived on a ranch near the A.T. Hatch Ranch where Chun Tim was the labor boss. “. . . Chun Tim, the Chinese, who for so many years held forth as patriarch over a thriving Chinese settlement on the banks of the Suisun Creek, located on the Hatch Ranch. Time came to work for Mr. Hatch at the age of 20 (corrected to 18). He saved enough to enable him to go to San Francisco and bring back a shy but lovely little Chinese bride. Here for 60 years the couple continued to live, rearing a large family and gathering around them several hundred countrymen until they formed a typical Chinatown.

“Tim not only supplied the labor for harvesting crops on the Hatch Ranch, but on adjoining ranches as well. He not only gave to his descendants the heritage of thrift and hone, but a love for the art and culture of the old world as well. It has been the writer’s observations to marvel at the magic touch which time has wrought to a Chinese descendant, reared in simplicity and obscurity in this settlement - to be endowed with an almost palatial home and social positions among the aristocrats of a large city. Surely there must have been culture and refined tastes hidden in the background of that crude Oriental village.”.

The year 1929 marked a new era. Big Camp closed down and the Depression was on. Wages dropped to \$2.25 for a 10-hour day.

Roberta Tim Quan, Chun Tim’s granddaughter, recalled a Depression-era childhood. “Toys were few and far between as money was not to be wasted on such frivolous items. Thus, we were most ingenious with our creative endeavors with the resources available. A discarded metal can lid nailed to a stick was something to roll along the ground. Nail wheels on a box, add a handle and you have a wagon. A handkerchief folded correctly and tied with a string produced an instant doll. Y-shaped branches and a piece of rubber made for hours of sling-shot entertainment.”

In 1935, Chun Tim’s son Youie with his wife Jennie and family, including young Roberta, moved to the Peabody Ranch. Youie was partners with Wong Mun in managing the 160-acre Peabody Ranch for W.C. Robbins. Youie, who was addressed as “boss,” was described as quiet, competent and well organized. He kept all records of the workers hours and wages and farming expenses. He also meticulously logged

the yearly rainfall. Youie's handwriting was distinctive as one of his passions was calligraphy. The town merchants were said to particularly enjoy receiving his checks, written in his distinctive form.

In addition to the Chinese labor force, during harvest season migratory workers would arrive and pitch their tents alongside the Chinese living structures. Roberta spoke about the migratory workers: "I always looked forward to summer even if I knew the physical labors such as cutting fruit, picking prunes and walnuts would bring sheer exhaustion. Summer meant the itinerant workers and their families would be encamped to help with the harvest. After a full day of labor, the children would gather and play baseball, kick-the-can, or hide-and-seek until it was dark. I loved their company as the rest of the year I only had my three older brothers for companionship. I envied the Mexican and Filipino families who lived in temporary shelters erected with wooden trays and canvas tent on dirt floor . . . it was so exotic! . . . We had one of the more 'comfortable' camps as Dad had built two shower rooms for the workers. The single men lived in a separate bunkhouse and a cook was hired to feed them. I remember that the Filipino workers didn't care for the showers, but preferred to soak their weary bodies in a hot tub. They dug a hole in the ground and lined it with large rocks leaving room for a pit. A large wooden tub was placed above and filled with water. The entire structure was wood enclosed as a bathhouse. Logs were placed in the pit to heat the water."

Julian Timm added his memories of visiting his Uncle Youie's place. "During fruit harvest time mother and I would cut fruit. My father, Sam, worked picking fruit and mother and I would cut fruit. Father also helped supervise the Spanish and Portuguese seasonal workers that my uncle hired. This was right in the middle of the Great Depression and the seasonal help moved their entire families in, pitching tents to live on the farm during summer school vacation . . . Farm life was hard. My mother cooked Chinese full-course meals three times a day besides working out on the farm. In summer she picked wind blown fruit - it was stoop labor - in between cooking. During fruit cutting time, she also cut fruit consisting of apricots, then peaches and finally pears. When mealtime came, my mother rang a small 'church bell' which could be heard a mile away. The workers would come in from the field and dry yards to eat and they were always hungry because of the physical labor of fruit picking and yard lifting of the fruit-laden trays. My mother cooked big meals to keep the workers happy. The meals were always tasty."

The Depression and World War II passed and in 1948 Youie left the Peabody Ranch to manage the Danielson Ranch. Then in 1960, at age 65 he had the opportunity to purchase land of his own buying the 40-acre Bransford Ranch. After 90 years of farming in the area, the Tim pioneer family were independent farmers. However, the sweet dream was short lived. Due to Youie's advanced age, labor problems and a poor market, he sold the property to Anheuser Busch for their brewery site in 1968. Youie

passed away in 1978. Other Chinese Families

Despite the early laws prohibiting the Chinese to own land, ways were found. It is documented that at least two Chinese owned land companies were farming pears at the turn of the century. One record indicated there were 60 to 70 legally filed leases in the area during 1900 to 1920. A man named Ching bought a ranch during World War I.

Lum Foon came to the Suisun Valley from Winters. The Foon family was very poor. Danny Foon, born in 1900, was the oldest son. At age 10, Danny found a job making pear boxes for the harvest season. The job was at Isleton, some 40 miles from Suisun and his only transportation was a bicycle. He would ride his bike there and stay the week returning to Suisun Valley on the weekends. Because the Foon family was so poor, Danny wasn't given much to eat. One time on returning from Isleton, he was so plagued by hunger he could not continue his biking journey. The story told by his descendants is that a very nice lady found him in this state and took him home and fed him a sandwich.

In 1890, Yee Chew Yong came from California leaving his wife and new son in China. In about 1908, he sent for his son Yee Eng who was then 18. Yee Eng's first job was as cook for foreman Lum Mon Inn of the Pierce Ranch where at about 300 laborers had to be fed.

Yee Chew Yong passed on this story on which occurred just before World War I: "Chun Pun Leen farmed four parcels of land in Mankas Corner . . . Believe it or not, Chun Pun Leen was heavily in debt in 1917 to his Chinese workers and to the Chinese grocery store in San Francisco (from which he purchased food for the workers' kitchen). Although he owed his workers three years of back pay, his workers were still loyal to him. All of a sudden came World War I. He had acres and acres of Bartlett pears which he sent east. Prices were sky high. He made a fortune, consequently. As a gentleman, he paid off his debts to the grocery store in San Francisco, paid off all his workers in full and in 1921 he returned to his native village in Loong Doo as a rich man. His nephew, Chun Buck Inn remained behind to continue farming."

In 1923, Yee Chew Yong returned to China to bring back a bride for his son, Yee Eng. In anticipation, Yee Eng rented a 20-acre orchard at Mankas Corner and there awaited his brides' arrival. It was on this ranch that Yee Eng and his wife raised four sons and one daughter. In later years Yee Eng rented more land. The family enterprise established a very successful fruit drying business and Yee Eng, a respected man in the community, served as president of the Wig Chong Land Company.

When those men who had come to California in the early days reached old age, they had a choice: To return to their home village or stay put. Yee Chew Yong chose to

return to China after World War II to live out his retirement years.

In 1948, Yee Chew Yong's grandsons Christopher and George started up a fruit drying business. Flush with success, the family purchased a fruit orchard in 1951 and built the place into a modern drying plant. Christopher's mother, Yee Eng's wife preserved dried fruits with Chinese spices, which are consumed like candy.

The boss man was still strongly evident in 1927. The foreman on the Hatch Ranch foreman at that time was Wong Gee, (aka Wong Fook Hong). He was faced with the problem of a worker who had "run amuck.". Law enforcement was one of the foreman's duties and it was understood that it was incumbent on Wong Gee to find the worker and shoot him. This he did. The sheriff had Gee arrested, but he was released the next day. Crowds of Chinese had gathered at the courthouse demanding his release saying the shooting was justified. The powers that were recognized the importance of Gee continuing in his role as labor boss.

Evelyn Lockie, who was raised in the Suisun Valley, recalled going to the Chinese boss man Wong Gee to sell pigs from her father's ranch and to buy rice. At these times Wong Gee would buy her soda pop at the ranch store.

In the early years, the Chinese children in the Suisun Valley attended the small Rockville school. Chun Tim's daughter spoke about her school days: "It was a long way for walking. . . . It was difficult in the winter and on rainy days." She went on: "I loved to attend school . . . always looking forward to getting a library book to take home to read on Fridays. I graduated with the highest average of 98 students." At age 16, she left the Rockville school and went to San Francisco for high school. Youie, on the other hand, chose to leave the Rockville school after he finished grade school and began working in the orchards.

Jennie Tim, Youie's wife, attempted to open a Chinese school in the 1930s to augment the Chinese children's education. This weekend school was on the Wang Chern Ranch. The school only lasted two years. As a result, few of the children born in America learned to read or write Chinese.

Eva Yee was a young girl in the Suisun Valley in the 1940s. After school and in the summer it fell on her to slice and pit fruits in the father's drying shed. During the season, it was not uncommon for the children to work well into the night. Eva's happier recollections were the nights the old-timers would gather and talk about the hard times, the parties and bringing brides from China.

In 1949, with the Communists in power in China, trips back to China for brides, retirement or to bury loved ones in the ancestral shrines were stopped. In addition,

there was strong anti-Communist sentiment among the Chinese in the Suisun Valley.

Home politics met the Chinese in 1909 with a visit by Sun Yat-Sen who was seeking support to overthrow the Ch'ing Dynasty. The Chinese community hosted a big party for Sun Yat-Sen at the Hatch Ranch. He spent the night at a local hotel; the first Chinese allowed to stay at an American hotel.

Evelyn Lockie also visiting the foreman at Towner Ranch. "I used to make regular visits to the boss man (there) . . . (In 1912,) he had a brand new picture on his wall and told me that it was Dr. Sun Yat-Sen, the new president of China and that he was a great man."

Politics remained a bounding issue in the Chinese community in the Kuomintang (KMT) party (Under Sun Yat-Sen the Kuomintang, a Chinese political party, established revolutionary secret governments. In 1924 it formed an alliance with the Communists and was led by Chiang Kai-Shek. The Kuomintang ruled China until 1949 when it was defeated by the Communists. Members fled to Taiwan.) KMT fund-raisers were always rewarded by a trip to the Suisun Valley. Jennie Tim proudly donated her gold necklace to the cause. A \$10,000 donation was given during the war with Japan and later \$75,000 went to purchase a war bond.

By the 1990s only two Chinese families remained in agriculture: The Yees and the Foons. Status in traditional Chinese culture is measured by how many of your descendants honor you after death. As it became obvious Chun Tim's descendants were to remain in the Suisun Valley, it was deemed desirable to bring his ashes back from China and in the 1970s this was accomplished. He was interred in the Rockville Cemetery with his wife Ding Shee and three sons, including Youie.

Many Chinese were buried in the Rockville Cemetery, some in unmarked graves. It is here that the pioneer Chinese are remember every year during Ching Ming, a traditional Chinese Memorial Day.

This year's Chinese Memorial Day is Saturday, April 5, 1997. The date changes each year.

Downloaded from the Solano History Database

<http://www.solanohistory.org/603>

<http://articles.solanohistory.net/603/>