

Chinese enjoy long history in Vacaville

By Kristin Delaplane

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'My grandfather came to America in the 1850s to look for gold. He wanted \$200 in gold to buy land in China. He stayed a year, got his \$200 and went home to the family he had started there.

"When they asked for more recruits to come to finish the railroad in 1866 or 1867, my grandfather told my dad to go. My father, Yee Yu, was only 18 at the time. After the railroad was finished, he bummed around until 1889 or 1890. Then he got enough money to go back to China to pick a wife. His name after he married became Yee Gim Wo because that's when he took on a generation name. His wife, Fong She, was 25 or 28 years younger than he was. He brought her to San Francisco in 1891. They went to Sebastapol for a short time and then they moved to Vacaville. There were many Yees in Vacaville at that time and they all came from the same area of Canton as my father. There were not many Chinese women in Vacaville - maybe only one or two.

"My father had his pigtail up till the time of the Revolution in China. It meant obedience to the emperor. The emperor wanted the men to wear pigtails and they wore them. Nothing would ever make a Chinaman cut it off. You could abuse him and laugh at him, but he was Chinese and he was going to stay Chinese. Mother used to keep the tangles out and braid it for him.

"My father had a little restaurant at Kendal and Dobbins. The family lived in that tin building and he made noodles, noodle-like tidbits and snack foods. Quite a few Japanese were coming into Vacaville and they'd come in and eat noodles.

"Sometime before I was born in 1901, George Powers, the blacksmith, built a big tin building on Dobbins. He divided it into two sections for two families and we moved there. It was next to the ABC Store, which was a Japanese store.

"We had a parlor, my mother and father had a room, us kids had a room and my sister had her own room in the back. We slept on wood bunks. At first we had an old outhouse in the back yard, but we were the first to have running water and a water toilet. It wasn't inside the house, but right out the back door. We also had electric lights.

"We had a little store and sold noodles, but my father really made a living selling lottery tickets out of the parlor. It was illegal, but to the Chinese it's a way of life. It was the

Chinese lottery run by two companies and Dad was an agent. The companies would be four or five fellows putting in a hundred dollars apiece and forming a corporation. The lottery was twice a day. Every afternoon at about 4 o'clock a fellow would go in the street and holler, "All ready now. Come on and gamble."

"As little kids, they'd pay us 10 cents to be watchmen. We'd sit there by a loose nail in the wall. When the cops would come around the corner, we'd push that nail, which was connected to a bell. The doors were made from 2-by-12s and barred with two 2-by-4s. By the time the cops chopped that door down, the gamblers were gone out the back door.

"Everybody played the lottery. My dad would hire a cart and horse from the livery stable and go around to the ranchers and sell tickets. When I was a little kid, I'd walk up to a few of the bigger ranches where there were Chinese camps. Every ranch in Vacaville had a few Chinese workers year round. They'd have a cabin to live in and a little place to raise a garden.

"There wasn't much money in town. The farmers bet maybe a dollar or two, maybe five. Johnny Spaulding and Joe Lewis lived on the Bassford Ranch and they'd walk to town three times a week. John was very superstitious. He'd come in and Dad told us kids not to make any noise because John was superstitious. One of the Penas loved to buy lottery tickets, too.

"There was a Yee family that had a grocery store in town. In 1918, my sister marked the ticket for the grandson and he broke the bank for a thousand dollars. He gave my sister a hundred dollars and the next week he went back to China. He'd made his fortune.

"My father had quite a reputation. He was known as 'Old Noodle Tom.' He liked to drink and gamble, but he was also honest and trustworthy. He also spoke pidgin English better than anybody in town, so he was the town interpreter. In any civil case at the courthouse, Noodle Tom was there to interpret. They depended on him.

"But he was disliked in Chinatown because he had a bad temper. He was pretty belligerent, always telling people off and cursing people. Finally someone shot him. There was a high wooden sidewalk and this man laid under the sidewalk waiting for my dad. He shot him through the crack in the board and hit him in the arm. That was a year or two before I was born.

"I would say 50 to 60 percent of the Chinese in Vacaville smoked opium, but they never went gaga about it. They'd wake up in the morning and smoke a pipe or two. It's only a little dab to fill a pipe. Sometimes they'd scrape the pipe out and mash what was left

in the rice and make little pellets to take with them. When they'd come home for their noon meal, they'd have a pipeful and go back to work. But these guys didn't get stoned. When I worked on the ranch as a kid, I used to come at night on my bicycle and have four or five little boxes filled with opium. Three or four merchants in town sold it. The boxes were about the size of a cork, made out of bone with a tight-fitting cap.

'In 1910 they dried up Vacaville (liquor). Didn't do any good, because they all went to Elmira. Jack Duncan at the livery stable got a jitney bus (horse-drawn) and took people there.

"In later years, when the automobile came, I worked for a soda and ice works place. We had a little Chevrolet delivery vehicle with a couple of seats. We used to haul Chinese back and forth to the ranch. I'd charge them \$1 to haul them out to Elmira.

"In Vacaville there were prostitutes, too. The Chinese prostitutes came and went, but one or two stayed when they got old. There were four houses in the Chinatown area. One was in back of Sam's club (probably Sam Lum) on the bank of the creek, a yellow cottage. Fanny, a Frenchwoman who was married to a Japanese, ran one at the end of Bernard Street. The other was right down on Kendal by the creek. That one was all Japanese. The fourth was on Main Street in Chinatown.

"The Tongs were like the Mafia. You paid them protection money. They weren't too much in Vacaville, but back in the '20s there was a shooting. This man in the Yee family, who was a tenant farmer in English Hills, belonged to the Hop Sing Tong. In 1921 or 1922, there was a war between the Hop Sing and the Sui Sing and there was a price on Yee. Now he and an old fellow in Vacaville had been good friends for many years, but the old man saw this as his chance to have a pension for life. He drove up to the English Hills with another man and they knocked Yee out, put him in the car and drove him to town where they shot him. That's a Tong - ruthless.

"That was the only shooting. The Chinese in Vacaville were well known and well liked, so there was really never any trouble. Chinese don't get drunk, because they always eat when they drink. Every ranch had a few Chinese and the ranchers' kids learned to live with the Chinese. They ate with them and the Chinese love kids. So the Chinese were respected.

'My father was smart. In 1910, he had certifications of citizenship made for the family. These documents were witnessed by H. Bristow, the justice of the peace, Edward Fisher, a cashier at the bank, R. Ramers, the Wells Fargo agent, and J.M. Miller, local drugstore owner. Those papers allowed us to build a small house on Dobbins in 1923. Otherwise, Chinese were not allowed to own property.

"The original Chinatown was on Dobbins. They were all tin houses jammed together, except at Kendal and Dobbins was a row of wooden houses. In the summertime those tin buildings were really hot. There was always a big yard in back for a garden and for raising chickens.

"It was unsanitary, but they had lived that way back in China in the villages. They huddled up there in those little places and lived in squalid conditions. We never had bedbugs because our place was fairly new, but I've lived in those Chinese camps on the ranches where you turned the light on at night and they would drop in your face like raindrops. It was an accepted way of life. You just got used to it.

"The Chinese took a sponge bath every night. They had a little tub and they'd soak their feet and kind of sponge bath all over with a rag. You washed your feet first because in those days you went barefoot. That's what they did in China. Whenever my mother could get us in a washtub, we were scrubbed with hot water. Others took a bath in a tub or went down to the creek to wash.

"In 1902, they took the bricks from the old college building and built a row of houses on the south side of Kendal Street. All the Chinese moved there. We got to calling it 'Cross Street.' We had lived on 'Straight Street' (Dobbins) and Kendal was always 'Cross Street.' Mother would always say, 'We'll go up to Cross Street and buy this and that.' Pretty much that's when the Japanese took over the west side of Chinatown. A lot of those Japanese places were boarding houses. They had cubicles they rented out. On the east side was an old Chinese laundryman, the old original Gum Moon restaurant and another old Chinese man.

"The Japanese were a lot cleaner than the Chinese, no question. They lived in just as much squalor, but they believed in soap and baths. They had those tubs that you start a fire under. Of course, with that fire going every night, there were any number of Japanese bunkhouse and ranch houses that burned down. The Chinese burned their places down from cooking over an open fire."

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