

Oral history gives look at Chinese culture

By Kristin Delaplane

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'There was a big Chinese laundry in town where the McBride Senior Center is. It was called Quong Sing Chinese Laundry. Two or three people worked in the washroom and there were about four ironers.

"The Chinese often operated their businesses as partners - maybe four or five men. The least help they had to hire the better off they were when they divided the profits.

"I can just see those old copper pots in the back where they boiled the clothes. There were two or three kettles. They built an open fire and put the kettles on that. When you'd bring your clothes in, they'd write your name on a strip of cloth and that was sewed on your clothes, which were all sewn together. They'd run a great big needle through all your clothes with this tag on top. That got thrown in a big kettle of boiling suds.

"Then they bring the clothes out, slap them on the table and take a bamboo brush to them to scrub the dirt out. They would rinse them and hang them up in what they called the dry yard. There was not a mark on those clothes when they were through.

"After the clothes were dry, they were ironed. They had these coal stoves for heating the irons and they had these big mitts that they grabbed the irons with. They would rub a little paraffin on the iron and they ironed everything on a big table. They starched everything. They did a beautiful job. They did women's dresses and in those days the dresses had all the flounces and pleats. They did a beautiful job on those dresses.

"You could come get your clothes or they'd deliver. When I was a kid, I used to go along with the fellow that delivered the laundry. The laundry was tied up in packages and he carried those packages in a big bamboo basket that he carried on his shoulder.

"There was a big olive tree in front of the laundry. In 1906, when San Francisco was on fire, we could see it blowing in the sky. I climbed that olive tree to see it.

"Anybody in town that wasn't poor had a Chinese cook in those days and every ranch had a Chinese cook. The cook did all the shopping and all the cooking. Old Lee cooked for the Fred Buck family for 30 odd years. When he quit in 1923, he went back to China. Old man Yee cooked for the Pierce family in Suisun for three generations. And you didn't just walk into his kitchen. He owned that kitchen. You ate what he fixed. The cook would have a room at the house. They were one of the family. I don't know where

these guys learned to cook, but they were wonderful cooks.

"I worked on quite a few ranches from the time I was a kid, and I got to be a pretty good authority on pruning trees grafting trees. I made a little profession out of that. I used to stay out at the camps. We stayed in shacks. The kitchen was a dirt floor. The stove was made out of bricks and mud for an open fire to put the wok in. The fire was made from the wood cut during pruning. Some places had wooden floors where the bunks were, always wooden bunks. You put a comforter on the bunk and a comforter over you and that was it. Sometimes there were eight, 10 men in there sleeping.

"You'd raise your own vegetables and chickens. If you helped raise the vegetables on the ranch, you got your board free. The rancher supplied the rest of the food - rice in 50-pound sacks, salt fish and other Chinese stuff that were shipped from San Francisco to the stores in town. The one who did the cooking, he got an hour off at noon and an hour and a half off in the evening to do the cooking. He also had to get up early to cook breakfast. Usually it was an older man. There wasn't much variety in the food - boiled rice, vegetables and salt fish just about every day.

"I graduated from being a field hand when I learned to pack fruit. This was when these Chinese were sharecroppers. Maybe a couple of bosses and me would be in the shed to pack the fruit. You got to work in the sheds, which was a little nicer than working in the field. Packing fruit in those days was almost skilled labor. Fancy packing the fruit in rows. Everybody can't pack and make a nice looking basket. You have to go by the size of the fruit. You've got to be fairly even, because there are three tiers and when you get to the top tier you can't go back. You don't want to squeeze the fruit, but you want to make a nice tight pack. We packed them in what they called a tin top wooden basket, seven inches square. Your fruit size determines how many rows of fruit go on top of that basket.

'In 1927, I started making the boxes that the baskets went in when they shipped the fruit. I did that for five years. That was the epitome of fruit work, to be an efficient box maker. There were all kinds of boxes - cheery, peach and pear boxes. All different sizes. Jim Kahee made boxes in Bucktown and he made a thousand a day. That's a hundred an hour. That was a mark all box makers shot for. It was piecework. I got 90 cents for a hundred boxes. I would average about eight or nine hundred a day. I have made a thousand two or three times.

"By 1930 things were bad. I said, 'Ma, why don't you move to San Francisco.' My brothers were down there. 'Take sister because there's nothing here for her.' "

"So they pulled out. I packed up my little car and my blanket roll and became a fruit tramp for the next few years. I worked in wine grapes. I worked in the valley. I went to

Phoenix and worked with the lettuce.

“Growing up we had a Josh house in Vacaville, a place of worship. They tore it down after the war. It was dark as the ace of spades in there. No light, just one carbon globe burning that was so fly-specked it might as well be nothing. There was a shrine - quite fancy wood carved with a picture of god in the middle. You buy incense and that’s what keeps the place going. You buy the incense, light it, burn some special paper and bang your head on the floor three times (kneeling and you bow your head to the floor), make prayers and that was it. That’s what our mother taught us. This was Taoism.

“Chinese homes were full of gods. The main one is the parlor god. There’s a front door god, a bedroom god, and a backdoor god. But the important one is the kitchen god that watches over the kitchen and sees that you get food.

“Homage was paid to those gods about once a month in the home. Mother would cook a chicken and we’d have some rice and tea and a glass of liquor. I’d help her carry the tray around the house to the different gods. We’d light the candles and incense and get down on our knees and bang our heads. Mother said the prayers. She only asked for peace in the world and that no sickness would come to our little family. She never asked for anything else.

‘Like most small towns the Josh house was also an old man’s home. They called it the Benevolent Society. The old men went there to die. There were a couple of rooms in the back for them and there was a big cellar. I saw many old men pack up and move down in the basement of the Josh house. They couldn’t work anymore. They had used up what they had left for food and before long they starved to death. Nobody took care of them, but you used to give them \$2 or \$3 once in a while. My mother used to do that for an old man who used to take care of us kids. He’d go down and gamble and maybe make 50 cents. Then he’d quit, because he’d have enough to buy himself some rice.

“That old man was the one who took care of the memorial ceremony for years. He had a bamboo basket and in that he’d put a chicken Mother gave him, some rice and tea. He took the train to Fairfield and he’d get off at the cemetery where the Chinese were buried. He did the ceremony by himself every year. Just lay the chicken there in front of the graves as an offering. Then he’d pick it up and bring it back to Vacaville.

“In the old days, when there were a lot of Chinese, they took a pig out at the cemetery. They brought it back and ate it. The pig was bought by conscription. In those days, a piece of roast pork was quite a treat. People would sign in the book how much they wanted. Mother would usually take four pieces for a dollar. Those pigs were bought in San Francisco. They’d take it out to the cemetery as an offering and then bring it back to the Josh house. It was our job as kids to cut the paper to wrap the pieces of pork.

"When the old men would die, they were never buried in the pauper field. Everybody in town would contribute to the funeral. You would write you name down in the book and how much you would give. We usually gave a couple of dollars. The caretaker at the Josh house took care of the book. He didn't get paid as the caretaker, but he lived there for free.

"Somebody would go with the coffin and burn the person's belongings. In the old days, this custom of burning a person's belongings caused a problem, because the cemetery was surrounded by grain fields and all the grass and weeds would go up in fire. So the Chinese were run out of Vacaville. They went to Fairfield with the provision that they would burn in an incinerator. You can drive there and see the old brick incinerator yet.

"It was also the custom to get a brick and write the man's name on it in India ink and put that on top of the coffin. Even after 60 years, the names are still there. When you dig up the bones, the brick is there. When they put in the Northern Electric track from Suisun to Vacaville, they had to cut through the old Chinese cemetery. They dug up some of the bones and there was always a brick in there. Most of the bones were shipped back to China.

"In 1950 I came back to Vacaville. I came back to die like the rest of them. I worked for Ed Uhl for a while, but my health was starting to break down. So I did welding during the summer months and in the winter I'd prune for Ed Uhl. I did that until 1965. Today, I'm retired and living in a trailer park in Vacaville."

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