

Memories of Chinese Shuffling Off to Work

By John Rico

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Aditty was frequently recited here by youngsters in our Yesteryear when the many male Chinese who resided here sported a hairdo known as a queue "pigtail". And, too, that's when long hair was an oddity on any young boy or man.

But those of us who knew many of the Chinese who lived and worked here, were fascinated by the lifestyles of these orientals, because they had come here from their native China and brought samplings of their cultures and traits to the sunny hills of Vacaville.

The invasion of the Pacific Coast, and especially California and San Francisco by Chinese dates back to the gold rush days around 1850. There was need for men who could handle a pick and shovel, and China was the place where such workers were to be had by the tens of thousands. It was estimated in 1860 that at least 35,000 Chinese males had come through the Golden Gate and had spread out to the slopes of the Sierras where they were used in the gold mining fever of the era.

In the years prior to the completion of the transcontinental railroad in May 1869, there was need for at least 10,000 Chinese laborers on the pick and shovel lines chiseling the roadbed perched high on the cliffs Of the Sierras. Most of this new labor supply was recruited in China.

As time rolled on, activity in the gold fields had diminished; the railroad was completed, and thousands of Chinese found themselves without jobs or funds to return to their native land.

Fruit and vegetables growing had become new sources of employment in California, and ranchers soon discovered an adequate supply of laborers among the idled Chinese pick and shovel brigades. Hundreds of these men found their way to Vacaville where they were preferred because of their willingness to favorably take orders from their employers. The first Chinese laborers to come here date back to the period around 1880.

Some of the more affluent ranchers were financially able to hire the younger Chinese for use as houseboys, paying a salary ranging from \$16 to \$25 a month. Workers in the field were being paid at an average wage of \$1 per day.

Ranchers showed their preference for Chinese laborers, because there was no need to furnish any board and lodging. It was a familiar sight to see these men shuffling off to work at local area ranches, carrying with them a small pail in which was stored a quantity of rice, and also a gourd, which when dried, formed a convenient "thermos" jug.

Most of the Chinese laborers concentrated in shanty buildings erected on the east end of Kendal Street. At the peak of the influx here of these workers it was found profitable by fellow countrymen to operate stores where merchandise, especially food items, were available.

The observance of Chinese New Year was not to be forgotten. Huge sheets of small fire-crackers were assembled, and on that day of celebration, the noise of the exploding fire-works could be heard for many blocks in all directions of Vacaville's Chinatown.

Puffing Opium Pipes

It was not unusual to see several aged Chinese residents of the area, sitting in chairs, shaded from the hot summer sun by the board canopies, puffing a way on opium pipes which soon drifted them into a peaceful slumber.

There were feuding episodes to mar the peaceful atmosphere of these orientals, but law and order officials made only courteous efforts to solve any of these killings, using the alibi that these tong wars were among the Chinese and no outside interference was advisable.

Passing time took its toll of these men from China. Their living quarters had deteriorated to the point where action to bulldoze the area in 1944 was the proper solution.

Vacaville's old Chinatown, its inhabitants and the buildings are only memories now. A quaint and interesting section of the community had served its purpose. Many of the men are at rest in the Vacaville-Elmira Cemetery.

Among the younger and later generations of local Chinese residents were families who had accepted our western ways of life. One of the most prominent was the Yee family, counting in its family group a talented son named Ah Wah Yee, who became the first oriental to graduate from Vaca High, which was back in 1919.

In 1928, two girls of Japanese ancestry, Mary Obata and Mary Mayeda, had also earned that honor.

Yee has left a cherished legacy in the art and literary works he contributed to the Vaca High yearbook, the Ulatis. The cover picture of the 1919 issue, along with many other sketches throughout the book, are an example of the talents of this brilliant student.

After leaving Vaca High he worked for several years at Schaefer's Big Country Store on Main Street, serving as a salesperson and store artist. His talents later took him to the Emporium on San Francisco's Market Street where hundreds of thousands of shoppers looked into the display windows of that huge store and saw more of Yee's talents.

Only in Memory.

Try as we can to preserve the past, much which has transpired lives only in memory. To have been able to enjoy the atmosphere presented by those Chinese in our past, is a priceless gift.

The tales that were told about old Chinatown; the tunnels carved beneath the buildings to use as hiding places from enemies; the gambling dens patronized not only by the Chinese but by a broad cross-section of Vacaville's population, are now history.

The aroma of Chinese foods breaking the early evening spell of the small community; the dried coconut strips covered with sugar, all were a reminder that Vacaville had become a melting pot for peoples of many lands.

I, like many other residents of the community, urged the demolition of old Chinatown because it had outlived its usefulness, but when those bulldozers pushed the many shanties into stacks of rubble, there was some remorse because decades of history were being erased forever.

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