

A BRIEF SYNOPSIS OF THE CHINESE IN STOCKTON

A boat looking much like a cross between a schooner and a Chinese junk sailed into Stockton's harbor in March 1850. This event marked the first sighting of Chinese in the Stockton area according to the local newspaper. The many Chinese from the Guangdong Province of China had heard of the Gold Mountain with its many opportunities. These first Chinese came initially to work the goldfields as contract laborers for large mining and water conveying firms although some did try their hand at being prospectors. California's northern mines were accessed through Yee Fow - City No. 2, today we know it as Sacramento. San Francisco was Dai Fow, the port city. Others more interested in the southern mines passed through Stockton or Sam Fow - City No. 3.

Not all headed for the gold hills. Those who preferred to make their living in an urban setting were Stockton's early Chinese settlers. The 1850 census listed 53 Chinese men actively employed as cooks, houseboys and traders. Stockton quickly became a favorite place to buy supplies and food, get news from home and served as a place to rest and recreate during the long, cold winter months. Very shortly Stockton boasted of not one but three Chinese settlements: a Chinese enclave sprung up near the Chinese temple on North Hunter Street not far from the Stockton Channel; another heavily populated Chinese area was on Washington Street between El Dorado and Hunter Street; and a third, actually a fishing village, settled on the south banks of the Mormon Slough. Of the three locations the Washington Street Chinatown became the most viable; but it waned in the 1960s due to redevelopment and the building of the Crosstown Freeway.

Stockton proved to be an important hub and the early Chinese played a major role laying the economic foundation in San Joaquin County as other Chinese did for the entire state of California. With great optimism and imbued with adventurous spirit, they arrived unfamiliar with the dominant language, culture nor even had an inkling of California's terrain. They relied heavily on a strong supportive network of relatives, clansmen and regional dialect. In less than fifty years they intuitively capitalized on the abundant natural resources and supplied the muscle power to create transport lines to move people, goods and services. More importantly, for that period in time, they served as the first and only collective muscle available. Stockton and San Joaquin County benefited from a symbiotic relationship of White man's business acumen and Chinese muscle. The Chinese transformed overflow and wetlands, reclaimed the delta lands by building levees and dikes, and created an agricultural bounty in intro-

ducing new crops such as onions, asparagus and fresh produce. And history shows the Chinese fired the first brick in the county to build private and public buildings.

The Chinese weathered dark periods of the 1870s and 1880s with increased federal, state and local pressures pelted upon them. Discriminatory laws, statutes and local ordinances spread throughout the State; however, the Stockton Chinese remained steadfast with the help of community leaders such as founder Charles Weber, Police Chief Ben Rogers, Mayor Charles Belding, and Sheriff Thomas Cunningham. And that list also includes farmers, lawyers, and restaurant owners as they depended on Chinese help and knew the true value of the Chinese character. Rather than physically demonstrating against prejudice, the Chinese pooled resources and did not hesitate to test their case in court. Quite often they won.

Chinese families took root with children establishing their own relationships and lifestyles similar to that of the dominant society. The Chinese Christian Mission on Lafayette Street served as the catalyst to Americanize the youth, this with the blessing of the Chinese family associations.

Chinatown had some historic firsts: On Washington Street the On Lock Sam restaurant owned by Wong Sai Jin, opened in 1895 and lasted well over a hundred years. Today there is new ownership, but the name remains. The Lincoln Hotel built in 1920 boasted of being a four star establishment for a time and Canton Low, the restaurant across the street from On Lock Sam had the city's first ice machine and the second telephone. Local police used the restaurant as a substation because of this convenience.

When Chinese youth grew of age they did their part in the armed forces. Few realize that in modern times the American Chinese of Stockton are the only ethnic group to give the city public gifts: the flag pole in front of City Hall, the Confucius monument at McLeod Lake and the gate at Weber Point. Without a doubt the American Chinese of Stockton is a mainstay in this city's fabric.

Today as we collectively celebrate the Year of the Rooster, we realize we have the best of all worlds. Parades, food, entertainment while seemingly Chinese is actually a fusion of East meeting West. Gung Hay Fat Choy!

SYLVIA SUN MINNICK