

The San Joaquin Historian



A Publication of the San Joaquin County Historical Society & Museum
Fall 2000

Vol. XIV- Number 3

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Published by

The San Joaquin County
Historical Society, Inc.
Located in Micke Grove Regional Park

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Cover:

On Lock Sam, 125 ½ E. Washington
Street, c. 1960, courtesy of Horace
Spencer.

On Lock Sam, 333 S. Sutter Street
August 2000, by Michael Bennett.

About This Issue

This issue was prepared as part of the celebration recognizing On Lock Sam and the Wong Family as the year 2000 San Joaquin County Historical Society & Museum Century Business Honoree.

As this story developed, it quickly became much more than a look back at the history of a business celebrating its 102nd Birthday. It soon embraced visions of the past as Wong Sai Chun planned and built his businesses in his adopted city of Stockton, and Jim S. Wong as he dealt with the task of taking his family business out of the path of the crosstown freeway and redevelopment south of the city center. It also embraces visions of the future as Robert Wong and other members of the Chinese community talk about and plan the redevelopment of a new Chinatown as a cultural and business center, south of the freeway that preserves and celebrates the cultural traditions of our Chinese Gold Rush pioneers and those who emigrated and prospered over the last 150 years since the Gold Rush.

It may be time again to dust off that pioneering spirit and take a serious look at the potentials that this multi-cultural city presents. The third century in this third city (Samfow) could be even better as we view our future with the increased knowledge of our past.

Congratulations On Lock Sam, and thank you from all of us who have found our "contented hearts" in Stockton.

M.B.

The author

Michael Bennett, is the Director of the San Joaquin County Historical Society & Museum. He began his tenure as the museum's first Curator in 1977, and has been serving in the capacity of Director since 1980.

On Lock Sam- In the Heart of the Third City

The occasion of the 150th birthday of the City of Stockton constitutes both a context and event to highlight a business that has been built by immigrants and has become part of the heart and soul of a pioneering city by welcoming all to sit at its table. This is a story of families and food, wars and fires, prejudice and peace, adventure and achievement, celebration and survival. It is the story of a town within a town, the meeting of cultures, the adventures of occidentals delving into the sights, smells, sounds and tastes of an exotic culture. The adventures of newly arrived Chinese immigrants, setting up businesses, schools, and houses of worship, and becoming part of the multi-cultural patch work fabric of Gum San, “The Gold Mountain” and in the heart of Gum San, Samfow, the “Third City.” Welcome to On Lock Sam- “Contented Heart.”

Except for the Spanish missionaries, most of the early arrivals in Gold Rush California were sojourners; they did not plan to stay after they struck it rich. It was the same for most of the Chinese who traveled to California. In late 1848 or early 1849 a Chinese San Francisco merchant wrote to his home village in Kwangtung Province, China, of the discovery of gold at Sutter’s Mill and by 1849, 323 Chinese men arrived in California and headed for the gold fields.

To serve the growing population of their countrymen, many Chinese began to import familiar goods and foodstuffs, and establish stores, restaurants, laundries, herbalist shops, tailor shops, gambling parlors,

healers and trade companies. Family or village associations were developed to help new arrivals with housing, transportation and equipment requirements--all in a familiar language. Many of the new arrivals originated in the Pearl River Delta of China and departed through Hong Kong and Canton, and may have indeed been surprised and relieved to find a similar geography and climate without the political and economic strife of their homeland.

This new land proved to be a hospitable place to grow many of the foods that were traditional in the Chinese diet. Duck spinach, bamboo shoots, spinach, sweet potatoes, Chinese kale, cauliflower, cabbages, broccoli, watercress, Chinese radishes, pumpkins, cucumbers, onions and scallions, bean sprouts, asparagus, garlic, tomatoes and celery, to name a few.

The cuisine of Canton and Southern China had been, and continues to be, very adaptable and inclusive of traditional and new ingredients. Every day meals are traditionally arranged around a steamed or other prepared rice dish. Meat or fish dishes often contain two or more secondary ingredients such as vegetables and herbs. Vegetable dishes often contain three to five ingredients. The courses are often served at one time, “family style.”

Celebratory meals and banquets are very different from everyday meals. Rice, as the center of the meal, and “family” style service give way to elegant soups and several courses served in stages to achieve

balance and harmony in the dining experience and provide ample time for conversation. While rice is still served, it is an accompaniment rather than the center of the meal.

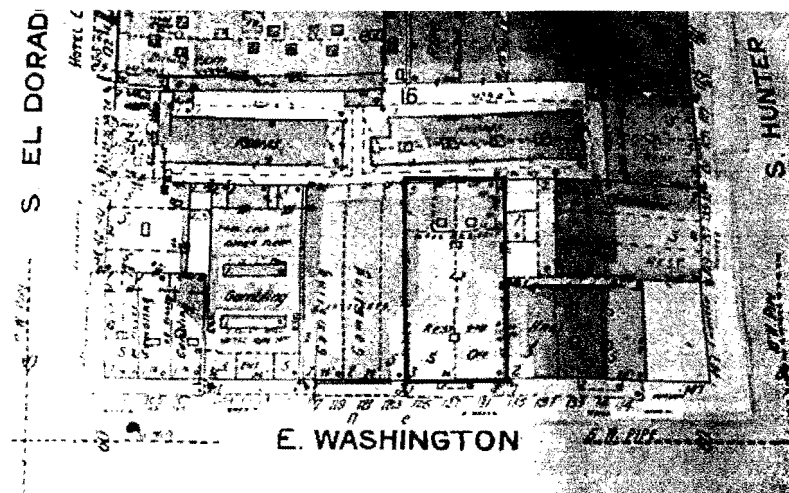
Interesting even provocative presentation is an important part of Cantonese cooking. Contrasting colors, textures and flavors are used to offset or balance a dish or meal; i.e. sweet and sour, soft and crunchy, cool and spicy. Fresh ingredients are a mainstay of the Cantonese chef. Accents of dried and pickled foods are often added. The aroma of fresh herbs provoke the senses and sauces such as soy, ginger, oyster, and garlic complement and balance the other ingredients.

Color, flavor and aroma are not the only concerns of the Cantonese chef. The principle of harmony extends to the nutritional balance of not just each dish, but also whole meals. The principle of (ting nai tian ho) can be traced to a Shang dynasty scholar by the name of Yi Yin. He tied the five flavors of sweet, sour, bitter, piquant and salty to the needs of five major organ systems of the body, the heart, liver, spleen/pancreas, lungs and kidneys. Many of the plants used in Chinese cooking such as scallions, fresh ginger root, garlic, dried lily buds and fungi have medicinal properties. The proportion of meats to vegetables, even the proportion of water in soups, is prescribed for maximum nutrition and good health.

Was it any wonder that Chinese cuisine was embraced by the occidental gold miners whose pragmatic but uninspired fare often consisted of sea biscuits, salt pork, dried bully beef, and beans and coffee. Compare that with the healthful variety of a cuisine that featured fresh vegetables and meats,

exotic sauces and oils, noodles, rice and aromatic teas.

While news of gold brought many to California, other opportunities in what was to be the Golden State caused some to stay. The 1850 census in San Joaquin County included the names of 50 men from 16 to 36 years of age who were natives of China. As the placer gold played out, the jobs in established businesses filled, and many Chinese turned to business, agriculture, fishing, railroad construction and delta reclamation work--skills and traditions that were developed in native China and applied here. By 1906, Stockton had the largest Chinatown in California with over 5,000 inhabitants. The 1906 earthquake and fire in San Francisco is often credited with swelling the Chinese population in Stockton.



Original location of On Lock Sam on the second floor at 125 ½ East Washington St. Sanborn Map from the Collections of the San Joaquin County Historical Museum

Stockton's Chinatown, centered around Washington Street, was still the center of commerce and social activity for our Chinese community at that time. Glenn

Kennedy, a long-time resident of Stockton and a well-known occidental in the Chinese community, penned this often referenced observation of a market day in Chinatown:

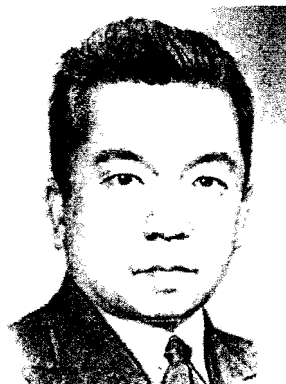
“Washington Street was the heart of Chinatown. It was the day of queues and pigtailed, mandarin caps for the men, small feet and traditional high collared black silk smock and pant-like suits for the women. In store windows were back-scratchers, vases of the sheerest porcelain, teakwood chests and brass candle snuffers, mandarin robes with gold brocade, jade goddesses, cinnabar boxes and many, many other things of interest.

On the sidewalk in front of the markets were open cases of steel gray squid, and alongside was usually a bloody aproned butcher, haggling over the price of dried fish or some other imported item. In the windows of Chinese delicatessen and grocery stores were other items foreign to the visitor. Herb shops had bottled preserved chickens, preserved snakes and dried sea horses. There were platters of crooked ginger root, green mongo beans, candied melon rinds, lichee nuts, pressed



The Quong Wah Yuen Grocery and Meat Market was located across the street from On Lock Sam and was also owned by Wong Sai Chun. -Courtesy of the Wong Family

smoked duck, and duck eggs packed in charcoal in other windows. Here too were shredded shark's fins for soup, and live rabbits and quacking ducks and squawking chickens, all in wire pens, giving forth a vile odor, all doomed for the ax and table. An open doorway gave forth the reek of tobacco smoke and the rattle of dominos drifting through it, with the smell of sandalwood, and patter of slippered feet down dark and sinister alleys. Nearby was someone wailing a Cantonese lament, moon faced children were flying dragon kites in the street and nearby park. Then you heard the click of abacus beads in an herb shop, or the chatter of some women admiring a bolt of royal blue silk in a store window.”



Wong Sai Chun, patriarch of the Wong family-
Courtesy of the Wong family

The original On Lock Sam was located at 125 East Washington Street between Hunter and El Dorado. It was started by, as of now, an unknown person in 1898. Wong Sai Chun and two partners bought the existing business in 1920. Wong Sai Chun was from the Kwangtung Province of China. He chose Stockton, the “third city.” over the other cities in Central California, like San Francisco and Sacramento, for its overall size and probably because of the large and

prosperous Chinese community he found here. On Lock Sam Company and Lee Yuen & Company are the two surviving historic businesses that originated on this block of Washington Street.

“My grandfather was first a very effective businessman. He worked to provide high quality food, and excellent service at a fair price”.--Robert Wong, grandson of Wong Sai Chun

The dedication to quality could be seen in the name of the grocery store and meat market he established across the street at 120 East Washington Street. Quong Wah Yuen, means “growing quality market.” The market was a full service meat market and slaughter house where all of the various special cutting, curing and smoking of meats was carried out. Sylvia Sun Minnick, in her book *Samfow*, offers this excellent description of Chinese business names. “--- in Chinese, a simple message such as the name of the company written in two or three characters can identify the type of business, clan affiliation, and even the owner’s euphemistic expectations for the business. In this regard the store Lee Yuen, when translated from Chinese characters, reads “source of profit.” Similarly, On Lock Sam, a popular restaurant on Washington Street, means “contentment” or “satisfied heart. ”

The Washington Street neighborhood, and Chinatown as a whole, were kept peaceful and productive due to the strength of the various individual family associations and the Chinese Benevolent Association. Annually, and as necessary disputes were arbitrated, shelter and burials were arranged, guidance was provided and educational and cultural activities were produced.

Chinatown in Stockton was also the scene of Tong activities.



This sign, meaning “Contented Heart,” has welcomed guests to On Lock Sam since 1898. It can still be found over the door of the “new” restaurant at 333 S. Sutter St.- Photo by M. Bennett

The Wong Family chapter in the history of On Lock Sam began in 1920, during this tumultuous period in Stockton’s history. Tongs had existed in California since the 1850's. Opinions vary as to their original development. They may have developed for any or all of the following reasons: defensive behavior in the gold camps, rebellion against the supervision provided by the family associations or employment that the Tong operated gambling, drugs and prostitution businesses provided. In behavior, not unlike the street gangs of today, minor disputes, loss of face and an appearance of disrespect often erupted into violence and even murder. Stockton was not alone with this problem. Feuds throughout the state erupted into wars, one of the most famous was in Weaverville. Of the twelve or so tongs operating in Central California, only three, Suey Sing, Bing Kung, and Sen Suey Yin, were considered strong in Stockton. Tong violence reached its pinnacle between 1912 and 1924. The Tongs seldom touched the

well managed, legitimate Chinese businesses. It is a credit to the Chinese community and its business leaders that the Tong menace finally ended. One can safely assume that the enduring role of the family associations, working together with police and civic leaders, probably had a lot to do with the restoration of peace.

In addition to social and welfare issues, it was again the family associations that turned their attention to educational opportunities for Chinese youth. The introduction of Chinese students in public schools was a long and difficult task in the face of prejudice. But once Stockton and other communities began admitting Chinese students to public schools, thereby reducing the amount of family-introduced education, there was a need to educate young people in their native language and cultural traditions.

Under the larger Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association, called Chung Wah, the Chinese Language School was opened in 1925. It brought, under one roof, religious, cultural and social teaching for the children.

"I remember, Chinese school had three teachers in three rooms with two grades per room from first through sixth grade. We used to have to go from American school straight home to do our homework and then, from 5 P.M. to 7 or 7:15 P.M., we attended Chinese school. After school, we would go home, have supper, then finish whatever homework or chores that were left. Then we had to go to Chinese school from 10:00 A.M. to 12:00 P.M., on Saturdays. We paid our little tuition each month and studied Chinese writing and language and Chinese history. In the margins of our books we used to write English phonetics for Chinese characters. Then when it was time to read or recite we would read from the margin

notes. It probably didn't help us with our Chinese reading when we used the notes."

-Velma Lim



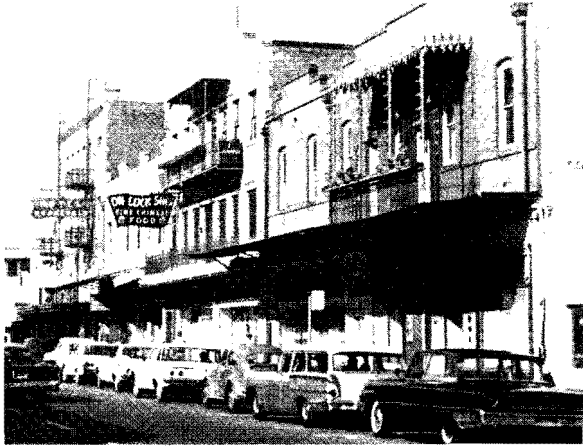
Wong Sai Chun and his wife Fong How Nuey,
- Courtesy of the Wong Family

Wong Sai Chun passed away in 1953 at the age of 56, but not before his family holdings included apartments and other investments in addition to his grocery store and meat market and now famous restaurant. His son Jim S. Wong then succeeded his father in the family business.

As Jim S. Wong and Warren Wong planned the "new" On Lock Sam, they held the hope of a new and vital Chinatown with On Lock Sam near the center. There is still strong interest on the part of the Chinese community in making the dream of a new Chinatown a reality. Current discussions with city government may help Stockton realize the dream sooner rather than later.

"My earliest memories of the restaurant were walking across the park with my family from our home on South San Joaquin Street to have dinner at the restaurant. As

children we used to play in the park and Lafayette School. The park and school are gone now .”- Robert Wong



On Lock Sam about 1964, just before it was demolished to make way for redevelopment and the cross-town freeway. -Courtesy of Glenn Kennedy

My father hired and worked with Warren Wong, the architect, for several years to design the new restaurant. He also designed my father's house. My father died in 1963 at the age of 45.” -Robert Wong.

The old restaurant was torn down in 1964 as part of the move to the new building at 333 South Sutter Street.

Jimmy Wong and his wife Ruth are well remembered today. Jimmy Wong was the nephew of Jim S. Wong and went to work for Wong Sai Chun at the age of 16 and later became a partner in the business. Part of his legacy was his reputation for joyous hospitality and love of people. He was well remembered by his friends and customers. A friend and customer, Butch Toccoli was quoted in *The Stockton Record*, “He met you once, and he knew who you were- and then knew what you drank.” He was born in China and came to Stockton in 1928 to work in the restaurant; he and his wife retired in 1989 and Jimmy passed away in 1993.



The new restaurant occupies the site of some apartment buildings the Wong family owned and the parking lot was the site of their old family home- Courtesy of the Wong family

In May of 1965, according to *The Stockton Record*, Mexico was considering sending 1,500 Braceros to help harvest California's crops, St. Joseph's Sister Mary Gabriel announced an \$850,000 expansion of the hospital, and Robert Wong, fresh from college and in the U.S. Army Reserve, joined his cousin Jimmy Wong and his wife Ruth in opening and operating the new restaurant.

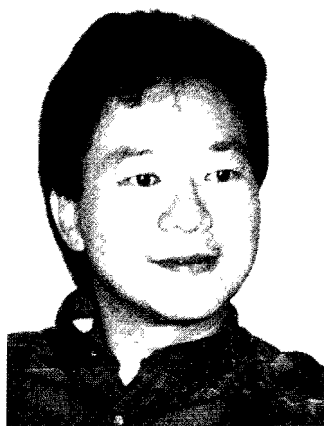


A Birthday celebration with Ruthie and Jimmy- Courtesy of the Wong Family

On May 1, 1965 *The Stockton Record* headline reported "ON LOCK SAM SHOWS OFF NEW QUARTERS." Robert, Jimmy and Ruthie, as many Stocktonians knew them, were very visible in the restaurant on a daily basis.

In 1974, Robert suffered very serious injuries in an auto accident that made it impossible for him to work. His brother Jenkin then joined in the management and operation of the restaurant. Jenkin made his mark on the restaurant and Stockton. He began work in the restaurant as a little boy and became one of the leading personalities of On Lock Sam as an adult. Upon Jenkins sudden death of a heart attack in 1993, at the age of 45, Robert again assumed the management of this Stockton landmark business.

Bob Hong, a family friend, as quoted in *The Record*, in 1993 said, "The restaurant is very much a part of the history of the Chinese here in Stockton. It is an example of how success can be measured by several generations...The importance of On Lock Sam is an example of how business can grow and prosper and become a part of the community."



Jenkin Wong was an active partner and personality at On Lock Sam--Courtesy of the Wong Family

On Lock Sam has served this community well. It has also served the individual families in time of celebration and times of need. From the birthdays of grandparents to weddings, New Year celebrations, and funerals, On Lock Sam has been ready to serve. To a large extent, On Lock Sam has been a preserver of Chinese culture and one of the anchors of the Chinese community.

"As a little girl I remember climbing the stairs to the banquet rooms of the old On Lock Sam. I climbed the steps, holding my mother's hand, one at a time. They were so tall it looked like Mount Shasta. The old restaurant was very long and narrow and there were three banquet rooms and a long hall. My family always asked for the back room. As children we always loved the foil wrapped chicken. It is now impossible or very expensive to get some of the foods we used to get regularly like bird nest soup or shark fin soup. We were a little spoiled.

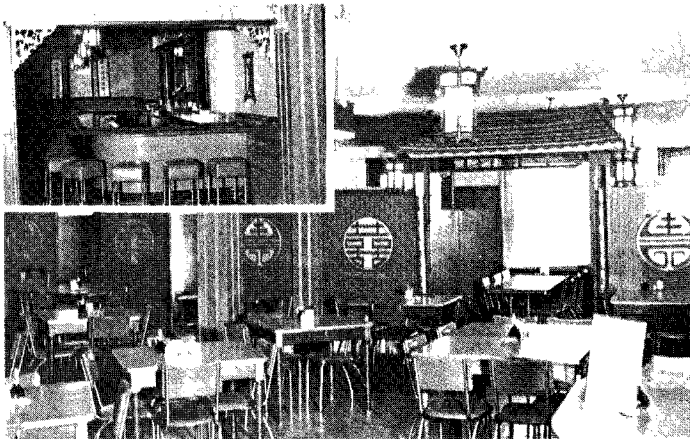
Everyone in town used to go to either Canton Low or On Lock Sam for important celebrations. A family representative used to meet with the Wongs to order the banquet in advance. They were always helpful with suggestions to make sure everything was just right. They made the extra effort to be proper and serve just the right things. We have many memories of happy times at On Lock's for birthday, wedding, Chinese New Year, and family association banquets.

Family funeral banquets were usually formal but somber meals after the church and cemetery. It was impossible to predict exactly how many people would show up to comfort the family and share the meal. On Lock Sam was always ready no matter what happened. One hundred or one hundred and fifty people, it didn't seem to matter."
--Velma Lim

Over the years, the Wong family has been very active in the Chinese community and a strong influence on the Wong Family Association. While family associations have been, and are still very important cultural and social anchors in the Chinese community, they have been joined by Stockton's Cathay Club organized in 1946. Formed primarily by Stockton born Chinese, The Cathay Club's focus was on the civic and social betterment of the Chinese community and providing recreational outlets for its members. The Chinese Cultural Society grew out of more recent emigrants in 1976.



An interior view of On Lock Sam and the wedding party of Jim S. and Lillian Wong- Courtesy of the Wong Family



This interior view of On Lock Sam was captured in a postcard c. 1960- Courtesy of the Wong family

They generally represent a broader array of Chinese origins and their mission was to preserve the entire Chinese cultural heritage, not just the culture of Kwangtung Province.

When asked about changes or adjustments in On Lock Sam's philosophy or purpose, Robert Wong replied after some pause, "There has not been much change in our philosophy-- good, high quality food, excellent service and at a fair price. We have added one or two spicy dishes because our customers and friends have asked for them."

On Lock Sam is an enduring representative of the Chinese community of Stockton and has been a true multi-cultural meeting place. The owners and staff at On Lock Sam have been greeting everyone, regardless of race or origin, and embracing them with the finest Cantonese food and hospitality. There are very few restaurants in San Joaquin County that are known in nearly every family. Fewer still have consistently represented their traditions and style for 102 years. In addition to its role as a multi-cultural meeting place, On Lock Sam has been central to the preservation of Southern Chinese culture and traditional celebrations that reinforce the Chinese heritage of older people and has provided both linkage and cultural enlightenment for the younger generation. Who knows, On Lock Sam may find itself in the center of a new Chinatown, in the heart of the "Third City".

Congratulations On Lock Sam on your 102nd birthday and on the occasion of becoming San Joaquin County's Century Business Honoree in the year 2000!

Author's Note

Little has been recorded on the specific history of On Lock Sam. Its history has been handed to each generation in the oral tradition. It is risky enough to try to interpret someone else's history even if one is a member of that cultural definition. To attempt an interpretation as an outsider is sheer folly. In my enthusiasm for this celebration of On Lock Sam, I have ignored the chance of folly and ask your forgiveness for my errors and omissions.

Many have contributed to this publication. And while it is necessarily a titration of a variety of published works, snippets from public records, newspapers and interviews, all are hereby acknowledged in the informal bibliography that follows. Thank You.

Special thanks to our special staff who not only read and commented on each draft but helped with research and picked up parts of my workload while this was in development. Thanks Ute, Debbie, Don, Robin, Juliet, Judy, Jean and Bill.

Michael W. Bennett

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Oral Interviews:

Robert Wong July 6, 2000
August 30, 2000

Velma Lim July 25, 2000

Robert Hong, telephonic
September 25, 2000

Velma Lim, Robert Wong and Robert Hong were generous with their memories and their assistance in reviewing the several drafts.

Stockton Record/The Record

June 18, 2000 Chinese Community offers input.

May 28, 2000 Letter, Chinatown left out of redevelopment.

Feb. 6, 2000 -Dragon Year comes in with a bang.

Oct. 16, 1998- On Lock Sam Celebrates 100th year

Jan. 16, 1998-100 and still going strong

Jan. 29, 1995 -Rumors of closing are greatly exaggerated

Nov. 12, 1994 -Jimmy Wong loved people

Dec. 9, 1993 -Popular restaurant owner dies

Jan 30, 1992 -A sense of place

July 9, 1991 -Lunch Break

Jan. 9, 1989 -Well earned retirement

Jan 23, 1989 -Ah, the memories (letter)

Dec. 14, 1988 -On Lock Sam keeps patrons coming back.

Dec. 21, 1988 -Restaurant owners say rule leaves bad taste.

May 1, 1965 -On Lock Sam shows off new quarters

Photographs and background assistance by Horace Spencer



honors

Enlock Sam

Restaurant

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