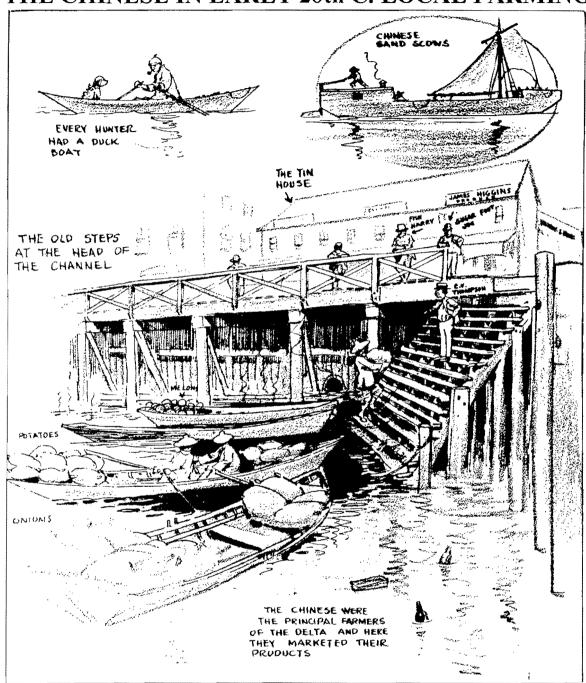
## The San Joaquin Historian

### THE CHINESE IN EARLY 20th C. LOCAL FARMING



A Publication of the San Joaquin County Historical Society and Museum

Summer 2001

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Vol. XV - Number 2



Summer 2001

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Published by The San Joaquin County Historical Society, Inc.

Micke Grove Regional Park P. O. Box 30, Lodi, CA 95241-0030 (209)331-2055 or (209)953-3460

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#### Chinese in Early 20th c. Local Farming

This brief essay seeks to provide a modest picture of the lives of those San Joaquin County Chinese who were engaged in farming during the early years of the 20th c. This was a particularly important period in our county's agriculture evolution, since it was the era in which local farmers switched from single crop to diversified agriculture and from grains to specialty crops like potatoes, asparagus and tomatoes. These changes first came to fruition on reclaimed lands in the Delta and the Chinese were major contributors to and beneficiaries of these fundamental changes in our local way of life.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Don Walker has been Archivist/Librarian at the San Joaquin County Museum since 1989. Walker processed, organized and created finding aids for all manuscript collections and books in the Museum's Kennedy Library. His CSU Sacramento M.A. Thesis is titled "Race Relations and Specialty Crops: San Joaquin County Horticulture, 1900-1925. In addition to his work with the San Joaquin County Museum, Don Walker is an Archivist at the University of the Pacific in Stockton.

#### THE CHINESE IN EARLY 20th C. LOCAL FARMING

In 1900 there were 1,875 Chinese in San Joaquin County. This was the fourth largest concentration of Chinese in the state, surpassed only by those in San Francisco, Alameda and Sacramento counties. San Joaquin's Chinese constituted 5% of the total county population and nearly one thousand of them were farm laborers. Chinese workers were essential to the operation of large farms in the Delta, where as many as 1,500 lived in 1910. The most important rural Chinatowns were at Terminous (until about 1905) and at Holt Station on Roberts Island.

Terminous became an important village for two reasons. In the mid-1890s the Hickmott Co. established an important asparagus plantation and cannery on Bouldin Island across the river from the village. By 1900 there was a second cannery on the Terminous side. Chinese were attracted to Terminous not only by the presence of the canneries, but also because area landowners, Jacob Brack, Arthur Thornton, and the Frankenheimer brothers, were among the first in the county to offer lease terms to Asian farmers. Sylvia Minnick notes in Samfow that by 1900 Terminous had a population of 750---all of them Chinese.

A 1904 map indicates seven Chinese settlements within a three mile radius of Terminous. Named for the worker companies that occupied these sites, the camps included: Dick How, Gee Fung, Hong Wah, Hop Goon, Lee Vooh, Mow Sang, and Sang Wah. Two of these companies, Hop Goon and Mow Sang, operated throughout the first decade of the century.

In 1900 the Santa Fe Railroad established Holt Station to serve farms on Roberts Island and elsewhere in the central Delta. This village became a natural "resort" for the hundreds of Asian farmers who labored in the vicinity. Holt was known as a center for gambling and prostitution. Police raids on vice dens at the Station are frequently described in contemporary articles in the local press. One 1907 article, reporting a major fire in the town, provides an inventory

of the Chinese buildings at that time. "Chinatown" stood on the south side of the railroad tracks while the Japanese lived on the north side. Chinese buildings consisted of a restaurant, a general merchandise store, an employment agency, and a large lodging house. All of these buildings were destroyed in the fire, which, according to the *Record*, left fifty Chinese homeless. The structures had all been replaced by 1910, when Holt also boasted a cannery, various bars, restaurants and rooming houses.

The most important event in the history of the town occurred in 1911 when Dr. Sun Yat Sen, future President of the Republic of China, gave a speech at Holt in the course of an American fund-raising tour. The White press missed this event entirely because Dr. Sun spoke in Chinese and was not widely known among Americans. In 1912 the press discovered Dr. Sun following his private conversation with John D. Rockefeller, owner of Standard Oil. The Daily Report asserted that Sun's revolution was to be financed by Standard Oil in exchange for exclusive rights to all Chinese oil once the Chinese republic had been established.

From 1905 two factors influenced Chinese to move south from Terminous onto Roberts Island and the Jones Tract. Bouldin Island experienced severe flooding in 1904 and again in 1907. These floods permanently shut down Hickmott's plantation and cannery. In addition, the Delta potato boom began at this time when Lee Phillips, then local manager of the Rindge Corporation which controlled the Jones Tract, began offering Asians cash rents on good-sized parcels of land, while Brack Tract tenants west of Thornton were obliged to lease on a crop share basis. As wage laborers the Chinese worked from early sunrise to sunset digging potatoes with special five-tined forks. They were paid about seven cents per sack for this work. The full sacks sold wholesale for one dollar or more each. With an average dig of twenty sacks per day, one worker could earn about one dollar and fifty cents. Each acre of potatoes produced about two hundred sacks, meaning that from

that acre the average laborer could clear about fifteen dollars. At this rate, a month's labor in the potato fields might net a worker forty-five dollars. Assuming a thirty-five cents per day food allowance, the Chinese potato field hand of 1909 still pocketed nearly thirty-five dollars a month, a figure that compares quite favorably with the average wages of from \$25 to \$40 per month that *Gateway* magazine claims were paid to White ranch hands.

Virtually the entire Upper Jones Tract (newly reclaimed in 1901) was planted to potatoes by 1903. Central Delta lands were well-suited to potato cultivation and were connected by rail to Stockton and San Francisco markets. Chinese soon realized that these factors presented them with an opportunity to enhance their income and to become something more than wage-earners.

Hop Goon Co. owned stores both in Terminous and in the central Delta. Sucheng Chan reprints a 1913 map that identifies three steamboat landings named for Hop Goon. One was located on the Jones Tract, while the other two were in the north Delta. In 1902 Hop Goon mortgaged crops on 238 acres of Victoria Island for \$3,172,50. In 1904 the company again mortgaged crops there for a total of \$8,820, while in 1907 Hop Goon mortgaged a crop on Old Jones Tract for \$4,750. If we assume that today's dollar is worth about one tenth of the dollar of that period, we can see that the Hop Goon Co, was a substantial farming enterprise.

The Mow Sang Co., managed by Lee Cow, grew potatoes on Victoria Island and the Lower Jones Tract as late as 1910. In that year the company was leasing more than seven hundred acres and Lee Cow mortgaged his equipment, consisting of twenty-five horses, six wagons, eight plows, four harrows, ten cultivators, one mower, one hay rake, potato hooks and "sundry implements" for \$1,280.

The Central California Record wrote of one Chinese in 1907:

Hung Lee owns one quarter of Sam Wo Co. His camp is the first one on Old Jones, not far from Holt Station. (Hung Lee is) one of the most extensive growers. He had more than anyone else this season...It is safe to say that he has a bank account in the neighborhood of \$50,000.

Between 1900 and 1925 Chin Lung was the principal employer of non-renting Chinese laborers. From 1900 Chin never farmed fewer than 1000 acres in a season.

Sucheng Chan has interviewed Chin Shou, Chin Lung's fifth son, and John Chin, son of Chin Bow, Chin Lung's ranch manager and nephew. From these interviews we know that Chin Lung came to California in about 1882, that he went to work in the Sing Kee rice importing firm of San Francisco, and that by 1910 he owned this company, which controlled most of the rice distribution in northern California.

Chin rose to position of such prominence as a result of the combination of business skills and facility with the English language. At the Chinese Baptist Church School in San Francisco, he early learned English so well that the Sing Kee Co., which also operated a labor brokerage business, began to send him into the Delta to translate and to negotiate contracts for parties of his countrymen who were recruited as tenants by San Joaquin and Sacramento county landowners.

Chin knew little about farming, but was a skilled negotiator and organizer. In 1898 he signed his first Delta lease---possibly with money advanced to him by the Sing Kee Co. In 1910 Chin purchased 2200 acres in the Delta, northwest of Stockton. He paid \$154,000, or seventy dollars per acre, for this ranch, which was the first property ever purchased by a Chinese for agricultural purposes in San Joaquin County.

Sucheng Chan states that Chin Lung employed about 500 Chinese laborers each vear to run his various Delta operations. Chin leased various parcels of Delta land until California law made this impossible. He generally sought long-term leases. although these were more difficult to obtain after it became clear that renters could make a "killing" in any given year if the potato market was good. From 1900 to 1905 Chin leased over 1000 acres of the Sargent Barnhart Tract and from 1902 he was able to secure a two year lease on this acreage. He agreed to make yearly payments averaging nearly \$8,000 in addition to fifty percent of his crop until 1905. From that date Chin paid only in cash.

In 1902 Chin also took out an eleven year lease on a one hundred acre parcel on lower Roberts Island for \$8,650. In 1904 he also began leasing lands from the Rindge Corp. on their newly reclaimed Upper Jones Tract. Here, he leased a parcel of approximately 400 acres just south of the Santa Fe Railroad tracks a half mile west of Holt. This lease cost him only ten dollars per acre. In 1906 Chin began leasing over 500 acres of the Elmwood Tract, just west of his Sargent Barnhart lands. These he acquired on a three year lease with payments diminishing slightly each year from \$11,500 in the first year to \$10,500 in 1909. On the Elmwood Tract, Chin's farmers grew wheat, barley, hay, beans, onions, rhubarb, celery, asparagus, and berries, as well as potatoes. In 1911 the Elmwood lease cost Chin \$20,435, or nearly twice what he had paid for it in 1906!

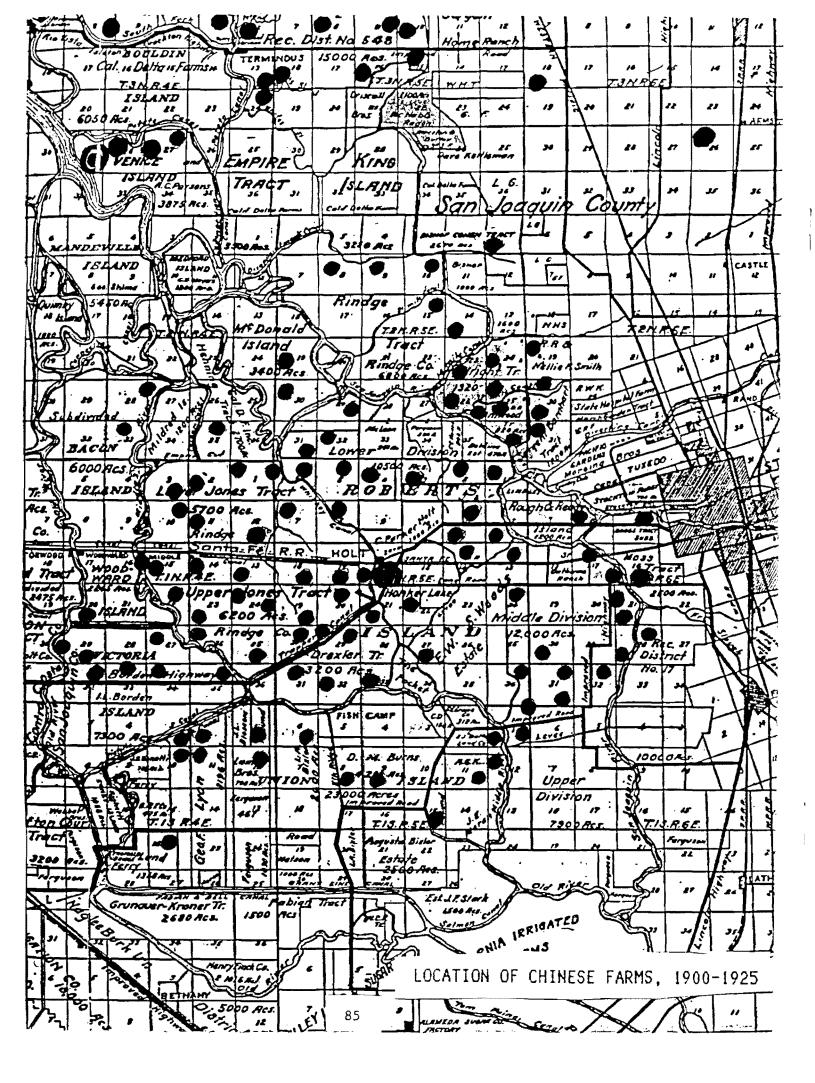
From 1912 to 1920 Chin leased acreage on Venice Island. Here he paid a modest twenty-five dollars per acre. In 1918 he began to lease newly reclaimed land on the Henning Tract just north of Lower Jones. Here his farmers grew no potatoes, concentrating instead on beans, onions and corn. This lease cost Chin Lung \$22.50 per acre.

Chin seems to have had "favorites" with whom he leased some of these properties jointly. Generally these "favorites" acted as on-site managers of the property. Chin Bow was in charge of the one hundred acre parcel on Lower Roberts Island from 1902 until 1911 when Chin Lung made him manager of the ranch he purchased in December 1910. Chin placed another man, Lin Wah, in charge of his Elmwood lease. Lin apparently served as manager of this property from 1906 until 1912. Chin Chung was manager of the Henning Tract parcel.

Research has uncovered the names of over one hundred Chinese farming operations in San Joaquin County between 1900 and 1910. The 1910 census records that, at that time. Chinese leased 5,381 acres in the county. Virtually all farmed in the Delta and without exception produced beans, onions and potatoes because these crops were the best low risk, high dividend agricultural investments at that time. If we assume one Chinese laborer to every three acres of Chinese land, we can guess that in 1910 about 1,795 Chinese worked for themselves as share-cropping or leasing farmers. Of records in which parcel size is stated, the average parcel rented by a Chinese was 222 acres. If we exclude Chin Lung's abnormally large acreages from these calculations, however, the 1910 average falls to 135 acres. The average rent paid was \$1120, or \$8,28 per acre. Available statistics indicate that all classes of Chinese enjoyed some measure of financial success as potato farmers.

In 1903 potato yields averaged 200 sacks per acre, while prices held at an average one dollar per sack for most of the year. A farmer renting the average 121.46 acres for that year grossed \$24,292. If he employed six laborers at \$1.50 per day for nine months, he paid \$2430 in wages. He paid about \$935 rent at about ten percent interest. Assuming operating costs of at least \$2500, the renter could still net more than \$15,000. This was a princely sum in a year when laborers ate for seventy cents per day and board cost \$2.50 per month.

Many Chinese on the Upper Jones Tract in 1906 lost everything when a freak levee break caused the tract to be flooded. It may be that the number of leases in 1907 was smaller than usual as a result of this disaster. The latter year was also unusual because severe flooding in March



completely wiped out the early potato crop, but farmers borrowed and replanted in May. Extra moisture and sediment produced by the flood actually improved growing conditions so that by late August the Delta had delivered a bumper crop of potatoes after all. Meanwhile, bad weather had limited crop yields in the Northwest so that there was a definite potato shortage in the East and prices were high. If the 1907 Chinese renter of about 185 acres had an average yield of 175 sacks to the acre he may have netted more than \$50,000 in a year that began as a disaster for everyone!

1908 through 1911 were good crop years but 1912 was not. In that year rainfall was scant and the Idaho crop was larger than usual. Prices fell so low that the Sing Lee Co. left 400 acres of potatoes undug. The average farmer was lucky to net \$10,000.

Several tracts changed hands in 1912 as big investors regrouped to take advantage of the plunging market. Lee Phillips and George Shima bought the 3,600 acre Cohn-Bishop Tract northwest of Stockton at fiftyseven dollars per acre. Three groups of investors bought virtually all of Union Island for \$117 per acre. In December Phillips and other investors formed California Delta Farms. This group bought unreclaimed Bacon Island for \$62.50 per acre and undertook reclamation of this and other recently acquired unreclaimed properties: Mandeville Island, Medford Island, McDonald Island and the Henning Tract. All of this land was to become available to renters at twenty-five dollars per acre.

In January 1913 Chinese farmers formed the Chinese Agricultural Association of Stockton to protect their interests. Farmers could join the Association for one hundred dollars per year. Members agreed to abide by Association rules in making contracts with White produce buyers. If Whites violated the rules, Association members were to boycott them. Those who failed to do so forfeited one hundred dollars for every carload of produce they delivered. The Agricultural Association rules stipulated that the buyer must take delivery of the potatoes,

beans or onions at the time mutually agreed upon or forfeit his contract. They stated that the buyer could not change his mind and refuse to accept the goods by making an excuse regarding their quality at the last minute. If the buyer found a quantity of the vegetables decaying, then he was to notify the seller within three days, after which the seller would inspect the shipment and would pay workers to cull the bad produce as needed. If the buyer did not notify the seller or the Association within three days, he would be obliged to pay the price mentioned in the contract. If he refused to do so, the Chinese Agricultural Association would sue him.

Although 1914 and 1915 were normal crop years, a severe freeze in June 1916 destroyed much of the potato crop and made Chinese renters sensitive to the dangers of single crop farming, 1917 differed from previous growing seasons in that the U.S. government influenced farmers' crop choices through price supports. By that year competition from Oregon and Idaho potato farmers had---due to that region's lower transportation costs--permanently mitigated the success of the California potato in eastern markets. Still, fifteen of eighteen 1917 Chinese renters continued to grow potatoes, along with onions, beans and corn. Because the government guaranteed sugar prices, two Chinese farmers, M.S. Yum and B.H. Lee planted about 200 acres of sugar beets. Since the average beet yield was twelve tons per acre that year and the average price per ton was six dollars, Yum and Lee still made more money on their potato crop than on their sugar beets.

Other Chinese planted beans alongside their potato crop. Those who grew pink beans grossed eighty dollars per acre, while those who grew white beans grossed about \$110 per acre. Since beans cost about forty dollars per acre to raise, farmers netted about forty dollars on each acre of beans. It is obvious that beans were not so lucrative a crop as potatoes. Nor was corn, which also became a popular crop for the first time in San Joaquin County in 1917 because scientists had developed new varieties that

ripened a month earlier than the old ones, thus giving local growers an edge on Midwestern competition in the eastern markets. In 1917 the county corn crop brought about \$16.80 per acre---still considerably less than the per acre value of potatoes.

Some Chinese tried other crops. Charles Young and Wing Kee Jan leased a peach and almond orchard south of Thornton. Apart from the two men just mentioned, however, surprisingly few Chinese seem to have attempted orchard husbandry. Ching Shan Hing rented a pear orchard near Thornton in 1921 but was sued by the owner for failing to treat the trees, as requested, against blight.

By 1922 only five Chinese took out new leases on Delta lands. The average parcel size leased by these farmers was only 127.26 acres with per acre rents ranging from twenty to fifty dollars. The relatively small size of parcels rented by Chinese suggests that their farm income was down from previous years. One reason fewer Chinese were signing new leases was that a California state initiative voted into law in 1920 forbade aliens ineligible for citizenship to lease land. All Chinese named in county records as lessees from that date are identified as "U.S. citizen."

A new entity, the Chinese American Farms Corp., in 1922 leased 510 acres on McDonald Island to Japanese farmers. Sucheng Chan writes that this corporation was formed by several members of the Chin family. Only one of its eleven board members, Chin Dan Chung, lived in San Joaquin County. Although Chin Lung was not eligible to sit on the board of Chinese American Farms, he doubtless had a hand in its organization and offered advice on its operation. Chan notes that the corporation was dissolved in 1932, at about the same time that Chin Lung returned permanently to China.

Of the three classes of Chinese renters active in San Joaquin County, least common were wealthy San Francisco merchants like Chin Lung, who rented land as an investment and hired managers to oversee their properties for them. Far more common were local merchants, who, in addition to their farming operations, owned stores in the Delta and lent money to renters and laborers. A third renter class were independent farmers who strove to earn enough from their crops each year to rent again the next. These Chinese had less money to invest than did the local merchants. Very often, they banded together in loose, short-lived partnerships in order to maximize their ability to make suitably large cash lease payments at the beginning of each growing season.

The Tai On Co. was a local merchant operation. Although it did begin with financial support from Dr. Wong Him of San Francisco, Dr. Wong seems to have withdrawn his support in 1905. From 1903 the Tai On Co. rented sizable parcels on the Upper Jones Tract on five year leases. The company's initial lease payments of nine dollars per acre gradually rose to eighteen dollars by 1913. These payments were exceedingly modest compared to those required of entrepreneurs who lacked the cash that would have enabled them to negotiate multi-year leases. Because they had relatively long-term use of their land, the company planted asparagus and a modest orchard adjacent to their bean and potato acreage. The Tai On Co. also operated a store opposite Woodward Island on Middle River that sold meat and vegetables to tenant farmers. Tai On rented its store building from the Middle River Navigation Company for \$120 per year.

The relative poverty of independent farmerrenters made it unlikely that landowners would lease to them on other than a yearly basis. It also meant that these renters were obliged to provide themselves with operating capital by mortgaging their crops, livestock and tools each year. Although independent farmers did make a profit in many years, interest payments took a substantial chunk of their earnings and prevented them from increasing the size of their acreage or improving their location. Ah Jim seems to have been the most successful independent Chinese Delta farmer. He leased land in virtually every year between 1900 and 1912, while no other independent rented for more than five successive years. Jim, like most independent farmers, grew no crop other than potatoes out of a desire to maximize his earnings even though the risk was greater. Ambitious farmers like Ah Jim typically rented new lands more frequently than did the big operators because they could not afford to rotate their crops, even though that practice was necessary to avoid a decline in the land's productivity. Ah Jim rented in five different locations in ten years. His name first appears in local land records as the renter of 100 acres in the Sargent Barnhart Tract. The following year he rented near Terminous, then in 1903, Jim was on the Upper Jones Tract. From 1905 through 1908 he paid nearly \$3,000 per year for acreage on the Rindge Tract, while in 1909 and 1910 he again rented on the Upper Jones Tract, paying nearly \$5,000 for 250 acres.

There may be a hidden explanation for Ah Jim's continued good fortune, for on October 26, 1912, he was arrested with eleven others in a raid on a gambling den at Holt Station. Jim was accused of acting in partnership with the others to operate an "illegal establishment." He was later convicted and fined \$100. Whether or not Ah Jim's illegal second occupation was typical of the methods used by independent farmers to sustain their cash flow it is now difficult to say. Newspaper stories of the time sometimes mentioned rural Chinese who took in washing to supplement their income, but few of the names of Chinese arrested in the frequent raids on Stockton gambling and opium "dens" between 1900 and 1925 appear in crop mortgage records.

Curiously, contemporary Whites thought of the Chinese as diligent and honest at work despite assigning them a reputation for criminal behavior during their off-hours. Landowners like W.S. Buckley termed them "the best all-round" workers, while County Horticulture Commissioner, Paul Lewis, noted that Chinese workers were "slow but very reliable."

Some news stories from the early decades of the twentieth century featured interviews with local farmers which suggested that many White growers were sorry that the Chinese had been excluded from immigration to California. Among those who spoke publicly in favor of further immigration were Stockton City Attorney M.P. Shaughnessy and his law partner, Judge Warren Atherton. Shaughnessy later helped Asians ineligible for citizenship to form corporations that permitted them to control land indirectly without violating California land tenure laws. Atherton's family controlled extensive lands in the Delta and employed many Chinese. C.B. Hart, president of the H.C. Shaw Agricultural Equipment Co., one of the largest manufacturing firms in Stockton, testified on behalf of the Chinese during the House Committee on Immigration's 1920 hearings in Stockton. He observed that the Chinese Exclusion Act was a "bad thing" for California. "I would like to see more of them," he said. "The state needs more laborers... The more people owning land, the more business we'd do."

Newspaper editorial policy, however, was uniformly hostile to renewed Chinese immigration. For many years the *Record* published outraged accounts of illegal Chinese immigration. The make-up of Chinese Delta cannery crews---as recorded in the 1910 manuscript census and reported by Sucheng Chan in *This Bittersweet Soil*---would indicate that the *Record's* concern was not entirely unfounded. Chan notes that at one Delta cannery employing one hundred forty workers, only nine had come before the Exclusion Law went into effect in 1882!

Among the various illegal immigration stories, one that holds more than average interest is a 1912 account of the thwarting of a plot to bring Chinese directly from Mexico to the Delta islands. A San Francisco smuggling agent named Louie Fat had arranged with another agent in Ensenada to

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