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THE CHINESE IN SAN JOAQUIN COUNTY

By Glenn A. Kennedy

The Chinese from Kwangtung Province (often called Cantonese) have been traders and travelers for centuries. No one is sure when they first landed on the West Coast of North America. Presumably they made their first appearance in San Francisco in 1846. They came as cooks on board merchant vessels. In 1848 two Chinamen and a Chinawoman arrived from Hong Kong to settle there.

There is no question that many of those cooks jumped their ships during the gold rush days of '49 and headed for the mining country. Many passed through Stockton on their way to the hills, while a few remained there.

The 1850 census of San Joaquin County carried the names of fifty men from 16 to 36 years of age, as natives of China. Sixteen were listed as traders, thirteen as stewards (presumably stewards), eight cooks, seven hotel keepers, 3 barkeepers, one miner, one painter and one fisherman.

In 1850 787 Chinese arrived in San Francisco, including two women, and in 1852 4,000 immigrants landed there. This no doubt accounts for the sizeable group which arrived in Stockton in the early part of that year aboard the small steamer Kate Kearney. In the middle 1850's Stockton had become one of the Chinese population centers of the State.

The first Chinese settlement in Stockton consisted of a number of old shacks and the former story and a half Hotel French on Bridge Place between Hunter and El Dorado Streets. The main Joss House was established in 1850's on the second floor of the building on Hunter Street just north of Weber Avenue behind the Windsor Hotel. (It remained there long after the turn of the century, somewhat removed from Chinatown.)

In 1854 the shanties caught fire and burned to the ground. The Chinese then settled on the banks of Mormon Channel west of Center Street. Here they remained for a number of years, then gradually moved to Washington Street, between Hunter and El Dorado streets, and the surrounding area.

With the gold rush days past, the limited number of available jobs for domestic help, cooks, laundrymen and fisherman were soon filled. The unskilled jobless turned to farming, a life they knew in their homeland. They readily recognized the rich soil bordering the then unreclaimed delta. In the late 1850's they were successfully farming in the Holt Station area, raising potatoes and garden crops.

A new migration of Chinese to California began in 1865. The Central Pacific Railroad needed men to conquer nature's barrier of Sierra Nevada Mountains. It is estimated that 15,000 Chinese were on the Central Pacific's payroll at the time the golden spike was driven in 1869. With the railroad completed in 1870, the cities of California absorbed the newly unemployed Chinese.

They now turned to reclamation and irrigation projects. For years the delta was a swampy tule marsh, thought to be of no use except for ducks, geese and other waterfowl. The Chinese had a definite part in its reclamation. As many as 3 to 4 thousand Chinese worked on a single large reclamation or irrigation undertaking. Reclamation of Sherman Island began in 1870 and was accomplished wholly by Chinese labor. They built a six foot high levee around the entire island, and as soon as it was drained, commenced farming. From 1878 to 1884 they farmed extensively on both Bouldin and Roberts Islands. Stockton was the center of these operations and had a Chinese population of 1,629 in 1870, 1,997 in 1880, and 1,676 in 1890.

Records of 1880 account for thirty two Chinese farms in San Joaquin County and by 1900 some 3,000 Chinese were working in fifty Chinese owned farm camps. As most of the Chinese were now in the outlying areas, Stockton's Chinese population dropped to 593 in 1900.

Then came the San Francisco earthquake and fire. The Chinese were the first to leave the burning city. By their own mysterious manner of quick communication, they spread news that transportation was available out of Oakland, so they headed for the ferries. Oakland was overrun with refugees, and every train leaving for the Valley carried more and more Chinese. They brought money with them and none asked for aid. In July 1906 Stockton had the largest Chinatown in California, with over 5,000 inhabitants.

Washington Street was the heart of Chinatown. It was the day of queques 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 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 steelgray 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 (litchi) nuts, pressed smoked duck, and duck eggs packed in charcoal in other windows. Here too were shredded sharks' 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 rattle of dominos drifting through it, with 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 the abacus beads in an herb shop, or the chatter of some women admiring a bolt of royal blue silk in a store window.

Chinese music came from an open window somewhere above, facing on a covered balcony with it's wrought iron railing. It was the striking of wood on wood, music of fiddle and reed, and someone singing in a minor key. Old Chinese in black suits, black hats and tieless shirts stood gossiping on the street corner, or reading bulletins pasted on the window of the news office. Others sat in their association rooms, playing cards.

At night joss sticks burned and paper lanterns glowed on those second and third story ornamental balconies, with a gust of weird and alien music from clashing cymbals, flute, moon fiddle and butterfly harp. This was Stockton's Chinatown in its heyday.

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S O C I E T Y N E W S

One of the most interesting items given to the San Joaquin County Museum collection at Micke Grove Park is a flag over one hundred years old, the first that is known to have flown over the village of Mokelumne, later to become Lodi.

It was the fall of 1869, after the town plat had been laid out beside the tracks of the new Western Pacific Railroad that the first building in Mokelumne was erected, a store to be occupied by Charles Oscar Ivory. Mrs. Ivory brought the flag from Woodbridge where it had been used in 1863-64. For many years he raised it every day on the pole in front of his store on the northwest corner of Sacramento and Pine Streets.

The now fragile old flag is made of wool, entirely hand sewn. It has thirty-five stars and is about ten by fifteen feet in size.

Mrs. Edith Ivory Henning gave it to Maurice Hill in 1962 and told him it's history. Mr. Hill has donated the flag to the museum so that it may be preserved for posterity. This month it may be seen in the glass case containing a Lodi Centennial Exhibit in the new Bank of America Building in Lodi.