

Yolo County Historical Society



Prez Says

Well, here we are again still in the COVID mess! Will it ever end? I am sure all of us are feeling the same way. We have cleaned out all the closets, have given away stuff we originally bought and then questioned why we bought it! We have read books, attended meetings on ZOOM (a year ago, no one even knew what ZOOM was!), redone our yards, remodeled our houses, and tried to stay busy without the help of our family and friends. We have all been challenged, but we persevere! That is what history is all about.

This newsletter is devoted to China Alley in Woodland. Dino Gay, the President of Native Sons of the Golden West, Parlor 30, contributed the information that he has researched on the Alley. I know you will find it of interest. I have also included some information that I researched for the Gibson House Chinese Display. As we welcome Chinese New Year (Lunar New Year) on Friday February 12, we share the celebration with the individuals who have contributed to the history of Yolo County and the town of Woodland.

Remember, as always,

History Rules!

Kathy Harryman, President

Chinese New Year



People born in the Year of the OX are strong, reliable, fair, and conscientious, inspiring confidence in others. They are also calm, patient, methodical and can be trusted. Although they say little, they can be very opinionated. They believe strongly in themselves but are also stubborn and hate to fail. The year of the OX begins on February 12 and lasts until Jan 30, 2022. (from Google search)

Old China Town – Between College and Elm Sts. (Dead Cat Alley) Outline of a Woodland Historic Site

by Dino Gay, President, Native Sons

The Beginning

The California Pacific Railroad (Cal-P) began in 1863. It is estimated that the number of Chinese employed by Cal-P reached 12,000 to 16,000 workers. Chinese trade guild representatives from San Francisco went to China to recruit the railroad workers.

After the completion of the railroad in 1869 many unemployed Chinese men appeared in the Sacramento Valley looking for work. Some were hired to build levees along the Sacramento River while others gravitated to towns like Woodland.

In 1870 Henry Aronson ran a general merchandise store at 527 Main Street. A small wooden warehouse stood at the rear – on the alley – which became empty. Learning of this, a Chinese immigrant contacted Aronson about renting the building as an abode. It is believed that this structure was moved to a location facing Dead Cat Alley to the south (north of the alley), behind Aronson's property on Court Street (between College and Elm). As other Chinese arrived, Aronson built more wooden houses.

In the 1870s it was estimated the Chinese population of Woodland was 100, including five women.

In 1879 the *Woodland Standard* reported that Mr. Cassili was driving his thresher engine past a Chinese residence near Washington Hall when he "broke through the ground where the Chinese have been excavating." Apparently, some Chinese men had tunneled under the alley – perhaps to create more space for housing, perhaps to stay hidden from the racism of the day.

The 1880s

The 1886 Sanborn Map shows a cluster of Chinese residents living along both sides of the alley between College and Elm. Also shown on the map are corrals associated with the *Fashion Livery and Feed* store.

Washington Hall (at about 417 Main) was an early-day amusement center built of bricks – two stories high, 100 feet deep and 60 feet wide. It was destroyed by fire after 1885 and never rebuilt. It was thought that bricks from this site were used to erect a group of Chinese houses on the south side of the alley, but those houses do not show up until the 1895 Sanborn Map.

1880 politics included these actions by local government:

- The City enacted Ordinance No. 2 prohibiting the preparation, possession, distribution, or sale of opium with penalties of stiff fines and prison terms for lawbreakers.
- The Woodland Board of Health applied sanitary regulations to abate the nuisance of cesspools caused by the dumping of water from the seven wash houses in the area.

Early 1900s

At the beginning of the 20th century, China Town had many notable characters: Ah Wah established a boarding house where many single Chinese men lived; Man Hop operated a store selling Chinese groceries and lottery tickets; Ah Min was a vegetable vendor; Ah Fat was a gambler who operated Fan-Tan games in the evenings, he was married to a woman known as China Mary; Gee Lee ran a laundry; and Boy Ying was the "Kingfish" who was eventually forced from China Town because of his underhanded ways.

Continued on next page

Old China Town - continued

There was also Quong Sing, a merchant selling exotic foods and liquors. As recollected by Will Weider in *Daily Democrat* articles published in 1973, Quong Sing owned a store where all the needs of the opium smokers were met.

According to a handwritten note in the Yolo County archives, China Town around 1913 was a busy place during Chinese New Year. Stores sold festive merchandise and gambling accompanied the celebration. The Lunar New Year was important, worthy of a week's vacation and usually occurring in February.

In July 1920, the stretch of the alley in China Town was paved by the *Clark and Henery Construction Company* with future plans to pave the alley to Fourth Street. *Polk's Woodland Directory* from 1939 to 1960 listed Chinese Alley as running between Walnut and Third.

The End

While the last of the wooden houses were demolished in 1954, it was in 1991 that the last remnant of China Town was dismantled behind *Chicago Cafe* (411 Main). The corrugated structure sat atop a 12 x 12-foot basement and served as dormitory for restaurant workers. The *Chicago Cafe* is one of California's longest running businesses. Newspaper ads date back to 1910, but some believe the restaurant started in 1903.

There is one "Tree of Heaven" (*Ailanthus*) left, reportedly grown from seed brought directly from homeland China. It is currently on the alley.

How Many Chinese Lived in China Alley?

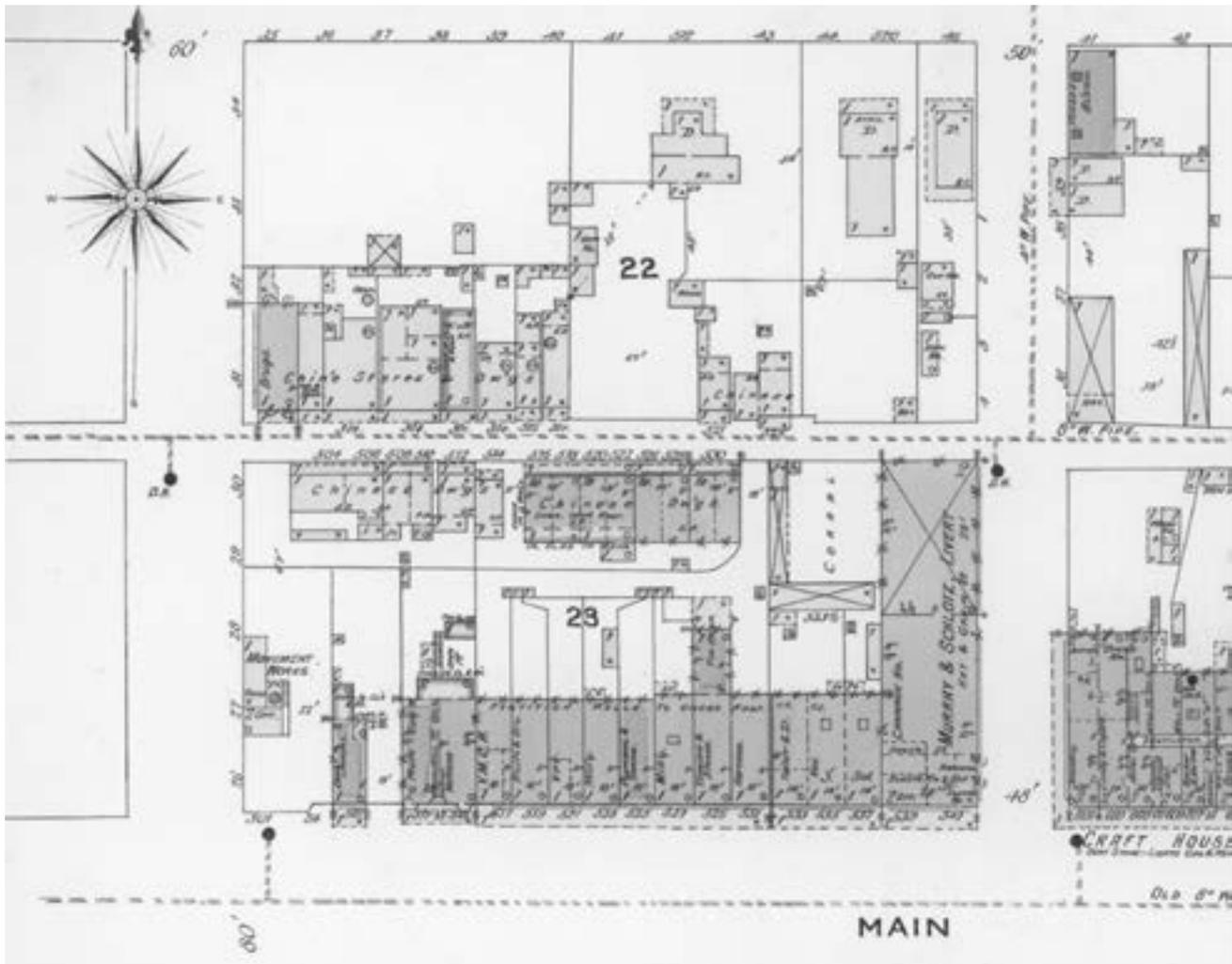
This is a question that is difficult to answer with a definitive number.

With the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869, California had a huge unemployed Chinese population. In 1860, Yolo County had a Chinese population of six individuals. By 1870, this number grew to 395. It is estimated that 70 Chinese lived within Woodland's city limits in 1870. These men worked as cooks in private homes and restaurants or as gardeners, laborers, and laundrymen. In the 1880 census, there were 100 Chinese living in and around Woodland including five women. Other sources say that the alley was home to around 250 Chinese.



Ailanthus altissima "Tree of Heaven"

China Town 1895



What was Life Like in China Alley?

Chinatown was located on the northern alley parallel to Main Street; bounded on the east by Elm Street and on the west by College Avenue. Here, on their free days, the Chinese could find the comforts of a common language and common customs. They could play dominoes or mahjong, gamble, visit the Chinese doctors, or just visit with their friends.

At one time, the alley was home to around 250 Chinese. Several of them operated gambling games, a barber offered tonsorial services, others owned stores and laundries, and a number were engaged as vegetable peddlers.

Chinese Laundries

When the Chinese moved into communities and began to live there, laundries were one of the first businesses they opened. Because most white males felt laundry work beneath their dignity, the Chinese were able to enter the wash house business with a minimum of resistance. Chinese laundries were labor intensive and required little initial investment. In 1870, there were seven wash houses in Woodland.

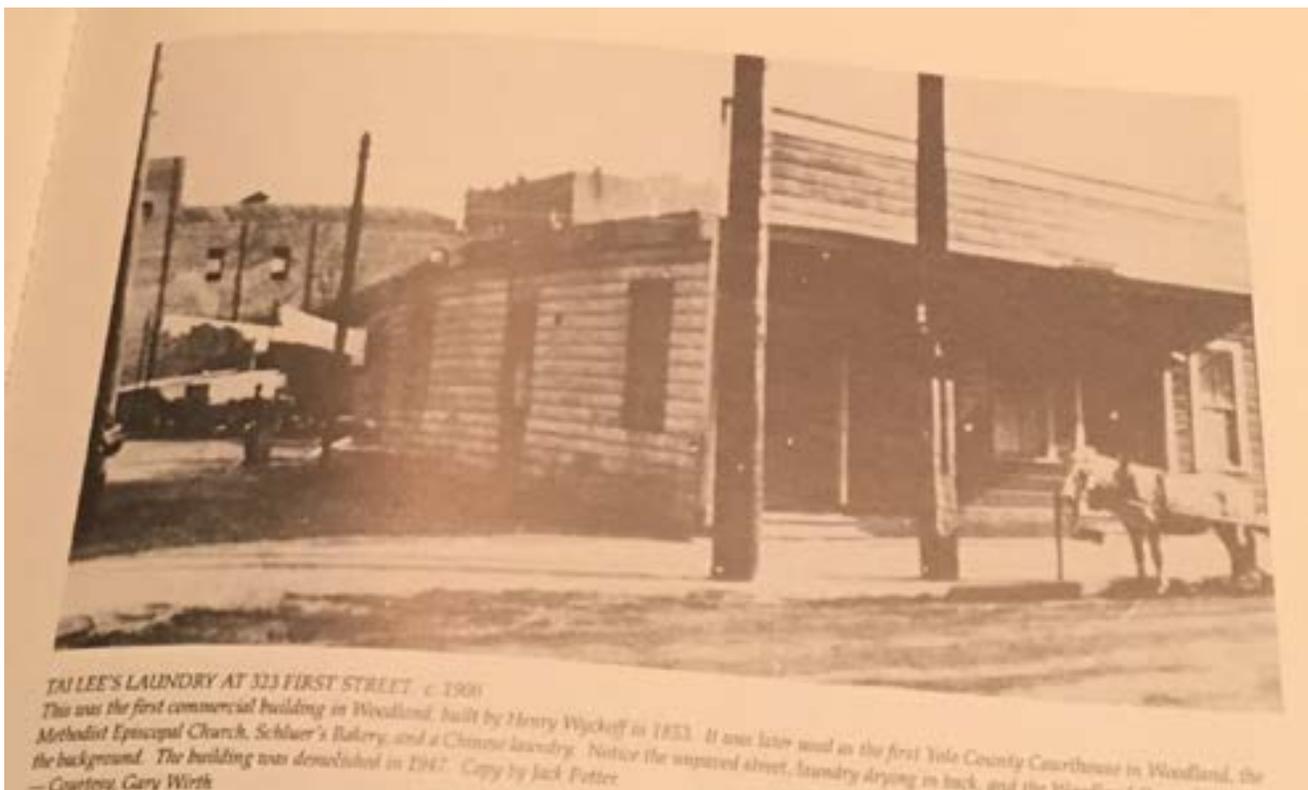
The life of a laundryman was exceedingly difficult and monotonous. Most of his time was spent washing, ironing, pressing, packaging, and delivering clothes and chopping wood. The work was hard, and the income was exceptionally low. Apart from their long hours of work, laundrymen made an occasional trip to Chinatown to buy groceries and have a cup of tea or a game of mahjong with their fellow clansmen and friends.

The washhouse building was simple. Along the wall was a long ironing board with six-or seven-men ironing. At the side of each was a sauce bowl filled with water set on top of a starch box. The Chinese would bend over to fill their mouths with water and then spray it over the clothes to dampen them. They then began to iron.

Steel irons were used. They weighed eight pounds each. The irons were heated on a hot stove. When the iron was hot enough, it was taken off the stove and used to iron until it cooled down. Then it was heated up again. After ironing all day, blisters would form which later turned to thick calluses. (*Chinese Laundries: Tickets to Survival on Gold Mountain* by John Jung)

Many Chinese developed health problems after only three years of laundry work. Some caught tuberculosis, others had ulcers, internal bleeding, or swollen feet.

Source: <http://answers.google.com/answers/threadview?id=586769>



What pulled Chinese Women to America?

The following article is from by Chung-Yu Hsieh in 2001 written for a Chinese History class with her self-reflection.

One of the more predominant reasons to immigrate to America was the desire to reunite with their families. According to immigration records, more than ninety percent, of the thousands of women granted entry into the United States between 1898 and 1908, were coming to join husbands or fathers already in America.

Many Chinese women also came to America to marry Chinese merchants settled in America. The women were raised in China and then brought to the US when they were ready to marry. This practice stemmed from the belief that it was safer and cheaper this way. After all, the anti-Chinese sentiment on the West Coast was increasing and as it was, many Chinese in the U.S. had financial difficulties.

Another motive to immigrate to the U.S. was economic. The lure of the "land of gold" was great. Unfortunately, often the women found themselves tricked into slavery and prostitution. For example, one of the early prostitutes of San Francisco recounted how she came to be a prostitute. She describes a laundryman who came to her home and told her mother and her stories of making much money in the U.S. and how he needed a wife. Both mother and daughter were delighted that he chose the daughter for marriage, but when she arrived in San Francisco, she learned that she was brought over as a "slave" and would be forced into prostitution. Her tale was an all too common one.

Not all motives for immigration were economical or due to a sense of family. Many women came for personal fulfillment. The number of Chinese female students immigrating to the US increased between 1910 and 1930. In fact, Chinese female students arrived as early as 1881. (Ling 1998) The motives of Chinese women immigrating to the US ranged from factors in homeland China to lures of "the land of gold." These factors caused an increase in the population of Chinese women in the U.S. that changed the face of America's Chinese communities, or "bachelor societies" as they were often called, forever.

Read more.

Ling, Huping. (1998) *Surviving on the Gold Mountain*. Albany, NY. State University of New York Press. Yung, Judy. (1986) *Chinese Women of America: A Pictorial History*. Seattle, WA. University of Washington Press.

Chinese American Population and Sex Ratio 1900-1950

Year	Total	Male	Female	Male/Female Ratio
1900	89,863	85,341	4,522	19 to 1
1910	71,531	66,858	4,675	14 to 1
1920	61,639	53,891	7,748	7 to 1
1930	74,954	59,802	15,152	4 to 1
1940	77,504	57,389	20,115	3 to 1
1950	117,629	77,008	46,021	2 to 1

Source: U.S. Census of Population

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Thanks so much to the following for supporting the *Yolo County Historical Society*.
We could not run this organization without your additional help.

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Vision Statement

The Yolo County Historical Society strives to preserve, protect and acknowledge the diverse history of Yolo County through education, communication and advocacy.

See our website at ychs.org

Editor: Barbara Sommer
basommer@ucdavis.edu