

# **NOTICIAS del PUERTO de MONTEREY**

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"Chinese Village, Point Alones," oil on canvas, painted about 1885 by Alfred C. Rodriquez (1892-1890). (courtesy of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas A. McGlynn).

## **A MATTER OF HONOR: THE CHINESE AT POINT ALONES, 1906**

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Cultural and racial stereotypes have plagued the Chinese in California since their arrival in numbers in the mid-nineteenth century. Considered by most contemporary observers as little more than a mindless source of manual labor, the Chinese have rarely been portrayed as resourceful and resilient participants in the development of California. One insidious stereotype which persists to this day is that of the Chinese as meek and submissive in the face of discrimination and harassment. Yet, buried in the historical record of the Monterey Bay Region are numerous examples of the Chinese standing their ground and fighting against the endemic anti-Chinese prejudice with all their might. One shining example of this fighting spirit was the conflict at Point Alones in 1906 between the Chinese community and the Southern Pacific Railroad.

The Chinese had lived at the small cove just west of Point Alones (often called Boat Works Beach) since 1854, religiously paying their rent to landlords such as David Jacks and, later, the Southern Pacific Railroad who purchased the property in 1880. The

presence of the Chinese village, and particularly the smell of drying fish, had periodically gained the attention of the cities of Monterey and Pacific Grove, but the village had become such an important part of the area's economy and tourist business that there had not been any serious efforts to remove the village until after 1900. Coastal development and the burgeoning cannery industry began to put pressure on the Chinese village, and by 1905 the Pacific Improvement Company (the land management arm of the Southern Pacific) began eviction proceedings against the Chinese to make the site available for a subdivision of coastal homes.

The Chinese community responded to the eviction notices with requests for more time to look for a new village site, a process which was interrupted by the April 1906 fire and earthquake. While the Pacific Improvement Company was distracted by rebuilding projects in and around San Francisco, over a hundred Chinese refugees from San Francisco's burned Chinatown moved into the fishing village near Monterey. The Chinese became more determined than ever to remain at the Point Alones site, but a month later they were visited by their own tragic conflagration. The following is adapted from Chinese Gold: The Chinese in the Monterey Bay Region.

The 1906 fire broke out in a barn at the west end of the fishing village at 8 P.M. on May 16. The Chinese tried to contain the fire with a bucket brigade, but the westerly wind spread the flames to nearby buildings, so a call went out for the Pacific Grove volunteer fire fighters. As in all the previous fires, the water supply was insufficient to fight the fire. Fire breaks were created at several points by tearing down buildings, but this time the wind was too strong, and the flames jumped each fire break. Realizing that the fire would continue to spread, Chinese residents rescued personal belongings, fowls, and fishing gear, while the volunteer firemen made one last futile effort to halt the flames. Within an hour the firemen gave up and joined hundreds of spectators to watch the fire from the railroad tracks. By 10 P.M. the fire had done its work, and all but sixteen of the over one hundred buildings in the fishing village were destroyed. The fire spared only a few buildings (including the temple) on the south side of the railroad tracks and a small cluster of barns and buildings on the extreme west end of the village. Damage was estimated at \$25,000, and since the Chinese owned everything in the village except the land, they bore the entire loss. As in the previous three major fires in the village, no lives were lost; the only injury was sustained by a spectator who fell backwards off the small railroad overcrossing and into the underpass.<sup>1</sup>

But the Chinese lost more than their homes to the fire. The hundreds of spectators lining the railroad tracks cheered the fire as it roared through Chinatown, and many of the white spectators joined in looting. Vandals broke into stores and dwellings not touched by the fire and carted their contents away. When Chinese piled their belongings beyond the range of the fire, spectators stole them as soon as the Chinese ran back into the village to save more of their possessions. Several officers took up stations on the roads leading away from the village and apprehended some of the thieves, relieving them of their booty. As one observer noted, "Had it not been for a few of the officers present the Chinese would have lost everything they possessed."<sup>2</sup> The next morning dozens of townspeople poked about in the warm ashes looking for valuables.

Numerous letters protesting the actions of the thieves were written to local newspapers. As Edward Berwick put it in a letter to the Pacific Grove Review, "Conscience, honor, delicacy, decency, seemed thrown to the winds."<sup>3</sup> Dr. Kupelwieser, a visiting German biologist who had witnessed the fire, declared:

I hope I may never in my life feel so ashamed of my white skin or white civilization as I then felt ... I wondered why they were taking things away from the poor unfortunates instead of bringing them some token of Christian sympathy ... it was a deplorable and disgusting spectacle.<sup>4</sup>

Editorials and letters lamented the behavior of the looters and wondered aloud about the morality of such actions in a community dedicated to Christian principles.





Chinese Fishing Village, Pacific Grove, May 17, 1906, looking toward Monterey (trees are city-limit line). Chinese residents pick through the still-smoking remains of their village. (Oliver Collection, Colton Hall Museum, Monterey)

There were also many acts of kindness towards the hundreds of Chinese refugees standing homeless before the smoldering ruins of the village. Many residents offered shelter to the Chinese and their families, and Pacific Grove Mayor Will Jacks took a family of six with a newborn baby to his family cottage in Pacific Grove. Many of the Chinese crowded into the unburned buildings on the west side of the village for the night, while others were put up in the old Pacific House Hotel in Monterey. A relief fund was organized the day following the fire, beginning with a donation from Dr. Kupelwieser. Despite the acts of contrition, the people of Pacific Grove made it clear that they wanted the Chinese out of the Grove—not west to the alternative site originally offered by the Pacific Improvement Company, but out: “We wish them to be removed so far that they will never be any more trouble...”<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the size of the relief fund gave an even clearer measure of the feelings of the community toward the Chinese—the fund reached a grand total of twenty-nine dollars (mainly from Berwick and Kupelwieser). No arrests for looting were ever made.

Many articles have been written about the May 16 Point Alones fire, and some of them speculate that the Pacific Improvement Company deliberately burned the village, but the evidence used to implicate the Company is circumstantial. The exact origin of the fire will probably never be known, but if the Company believed they could resolve the issue by burning most of the village, they clearly underestimated the resolve of the Chinese villagers. Two days following the fire, the *Pacific Grove Review* stated: “The question of the removal of Chinatown is now settled.”<sup>6</sup> They could not have been more wrong. Far from being the end of the struggle between the Pacific Improvement Company and the Chinese, the fire was really the beginning. In scenes comparable to the civil rights sit-ins of the 1960s, the Chinese at the Point Alones village made a heroic effort to remain there.

The next day the Pacific Improvement Company built a fence around the burned village site and posted several guards at the entrance. Meanwhile, an estimated 100 Chinese crowded into the unburned buildings outside the fence and made it clear that they intended to remain and to rebuild the village on the burned site as well. The Chinese began a small guerilla war to gain re-entry into the burned section. They distracted the



guards, tore down the fence, and entered the burned section of the village to build temporary shacks out of squid drying racks which had survived the fire. The guards, armed with shotguns, forcibly evicted the group, and when one Chinese woman sat down and refused to leave, the guards dragged her kicking and screaming out the gate.<sup>6</sup>

The internal correspondence of the Pacific Improvement Company provides a fascinating perspective on the conflict between the Company and the Chinese. Far from being the omniscient and powerful corporation, the Company was perplexed by the actions of the Chinese protesters at Point Alones. The Pacific Improvement Company was on the defensive from the beginning of the struggle, concerned about public opinion and afraid of the consequences should someone be injured or killed in the conflict. A week after the fire, Chinese occupied buildings west and south of the burned section, while guards patrolled the fence surrounding the remainder of the village site. Minor skirmishes between guards and Chinese punctuated the uneasy peace. The company erected some new cottages on the south side of the railroad tracks so the Chinese would move out of the buildings on the west end. But after three of the cottages had been begun, J.P. Pryor (General Agent of the company) learned that the Chinese refused to move into them: "I therefore prefer to spend...money on the guards, rather than waste it on cottages which the Chinese refuse to occupy." As time passed Pryor became increasingly concerned for the safety of his guards: "I am reliably informed that the Chinese have purchased every firearm to be had in Monterey. I know that they have threatened to shoot and kill my men." The Chinese had begun to build new buildings on the south side of the railroad tracks near the temple, and when the guards tore the buildings down, the Chinese threatened to shoot, but they did not. Instead, they filed charges of assault and destruction of private property against the Company's guards; the local Justice Court judge dismissed the charges.<sup>7</sup>

In late June 1906 the Chinese again took the offensive in the courts. On June 25 attorneys Sandholdt and Shaw filed a suit titled "Demand for Surrender of Real Property" on behalf of thirty-five named Chinese. The suit asked that the burned district be returned to the Chinese. While this suit and various counter-suits by the Pacific Improvement Company began their laborious journey through the courts, the guards patrolled the fence and the Chinese occupied the buildings to the west and south.<sup>8</sup>

Beyond the principle of resisting an unfair eviction, most Chinese fishermen fought because the loss of the site and the drying yards meant they would be without a livelihood. There were few places in California that Chinese fishermen could work, as anti-Chinese fishing restrictions had driven most of the Chinese out of the Sacramento River Delta and San Francisco Bay. Monterey was the last stronghold of extensive fishing in Northern California. Most leaders of the Chinese resistance such as Tom Yuen, Tom Wong, and Tuck Lee, were California-born fishermen who had grown up at a time when educational opportunities in Monterey (except for the Mission school) were non-existent. Tuck Lee, in particular, was a persistent foe of the Company's efforts to move the village. Arrested several times and named in most of the suits filed by the Company, Tuck Lee was a direct descendant of one of the original Monterey Chinese fishing families of the 1850s.

Why did the Pacific Improvement Company, a historic champion (and employer) of the Chinese in California, work so hard to oust the Chinese from Point Alones? All available evidence suggests that the Company was responding to public opinion against the Chinese in Pacific Grove and neighboring Monterey. The towns wanted the Chinese evicted. While the Company was embroiled in the first week of the struggle, Shepard learned that one of the local newspapers was taking the side of the Chinese and angrily instructed Pryor to go to the offices of the newspaper and tell the editor that should his editorial policy continue, "we are disposed to immediately tear down the fence and permit the Chinamen to re-occupy the old premises, and will never again attempt anything toward their removal, leaving the Chinese and their squid-drying affairs wholly in the hands of others. This is no threat, but straight business."<sup>9</sup>

During the summer and early fall of 1906, the Chinese negotiated with J.B. McAbee for a lease on his beach, a quarter-mile east of Point Alones, within the city limits of

Monterey. Officially named Arena Gorda (Thick Sand) Beach, the beach and adjacent property were the only ocean-front property not subdivided when New Monterey was laid out in 1889.<sup>10</sup> In the fall of 1906, while the Chinese were crowded together in the remaining buildings at Point Alones, representatives from the Chinese village as well as Chinese from San Francisco approached McAbee about leasing the beach for a fishing village site. In October 1906 McAbee agreed to a long-term lease of the property. The news of the tentative arrangement reached the Monterey public and the Pacific Improvement Company at about the same time. The Company was delighted; the people of Monterey were furious. Residents of New Monterey, lead by W.N. Furlong, the Prebles, and the Murrys (who had purchased the nearby Tevis mansion), quickly formed a committee and offered to purchase the land from McAbee to prevent the Chinese from signing a lease and moving there. McAbee gave the committee a week to raise a first payment of \$5,000, but before the week had elapsed, McAbee signed the lease with the Chinese.<sup>11</sup>

When A.D. Shepard, General Manager of the Pacific Improvement Company, learned of the move, he was exuberant:

I am inclined to rejoice, that we have escaped an incubus on our premises and the transfer means a heavy increase in value of the P.I. Co. properties. I do not believe that Chinatown will be detrimental to New Monterey. In any event, it is not a trouble of our making, and the people who have been antagonistic to us, because of the Chinese colony we have been thought to encourage, can now turn their attention elsewhere."<sup>12</sup>

The Chinese were slow to leave the Point Alones site, and they trickled out of the few remaining buildings through the winter of 1906-07. Some of the shacks were moved to the new Chinatown at McAbee while the more flimsy ones were torn down. Exactly 365 days after the 1906 fire, Tuck Lee, the last to depart, left Point Alones and the Chinese surrendered the village site. Only the temple south of the railroad tracks remained, and it was later moved to McAbee Beach.<sup>13</sup>



Point Alones, May 17, 1906. Chinese residents have rescued their safe. (Oliver Collection, Colton Hall Museum, Monterey)



Public opinion had favored the underdog Chinese in their year-long struggle with the powerful Pacific Improvement Company, and the Company abandoned its plans to subdivide the village site into ocean-front home sites. Instead, in November 1906 Shepard instructed Pryor to announce "that the Board of Directors of the Pacific Improvement Company have donated Chinatown Point to the University of California for park and laboratory purposes." The company's new plan called for the construction of a subdivision (named University Park) in which faculty at the laboratory could purchase homes, thus extracting some profit from the gift. In December Benjamin Ide Wheeler, President of the University, conveyed the Board of Regents' thanks for the gift.<sup>14</sup> The transfer of the point to the University of California was an ingenious solution to a sticky public relations problem for the Pacific Improvement Company.

The year-long struggle between the Chinese and the Southern Pacific Railroad ended in a clear victory for the Chinese as they not only had a new village site closer to Monterey, but the largest corporation in California was forced to give the old village site away. The Chinese village remained at McAbee Beach until the mid-1920's, while in 1917 the old village site became the site of Stanford University's Hopkins Marine Station.

#### NOTES

- 1 Pacific Grove Review, May 18, 1906.
- 2 Watsonville Pajaronian, May 22, 1906.
- 3 Pacific Grove Review, May 22, 1906.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid. See also, Pacific Improvement Company Files for 1906, Special Collections, Stanford University Library.
- 7 Pacific Improvement Company Files, 1906.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Monterey Cypress, January 7, 1889.
- 11 Pacific Grove Review, November 2, 1906.
- 12 Letter from A.D. Shepard to J.P. Pryor, November 7, 1906, Pacific Improvement Company files.
- 13 Monterey Cypress, May 17, 1906.
- 14 Pacific Improvement Company files.

### Editor's update on *Casa de las Olas*, Part II:

We are grateful to Montereyan Mrs. Charles L. Frost for completing the tale of "The Windmill of *Hacienda Grande*." Mrs. Frost has written:

My husband and I bought the Stolte property some thirty years ago. The four acres of property had once been a turkey farm, then the Stolte Construction Yard and was filled with construction material including the windmill which was still painted green and looked pretty good but was propped up with timbers; we were concerned that one day it might fall on someone. Ever so often someone would come in and want to buy it, but it would not have withstood a move, and of course eventually it collapsed — fortunately when no one was around.

Mrs. Frost told us about another interesting historical remnant moldering at the old turkey farm property (on Casanova Avenue, just west of Laguna Grande). Mr. Stolte had an associate who formerly had done contracting for Hearst's San Simeon; this Mr. Carl Daniels had salvaged all kinds of unused material from the great estate. Included in the debris of Mr. Stolte's construction yard was the plaque of a beautiful Italian angel mounted on redwood! Attempts were made to shelter her, but she gathered moss and grime until one fine day when a passing lady artist saw her, offered Mrs. Frost twenty-five dollars, and carted the angelic gamin away.

—B.H.M.

## *Merry Christmas!*



We would like to express our deep appreciation to Betty Hoag McGlynn, our retiring *Noticias* editor, for her excellence in this capacity since December of 1983. The Board of Directors is pleased that she now serves as Art Advisor to the Association.

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