

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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California's Chinese

We haven't written much about the Chinese in California and material on this subject is rather scarce, but the part that 'these Orientals played in the early development in the state is most creditable and should certainly be collected by all seekers after Californiana.

In News and Views, the publication of the Division of Beaches and Parks, Jack R. Dyson, assistant historian, has given the readers an interesting article entitled "Old Chinese Store Recalls Golden Era," from which we will borrow material today in order that the early Chinese settlers and workers in California will not be forgotten.

Among new exhibits among the Historical Monuments is the recreating of a Chinese store of the Gold Rush era at Marshall Gold Discovery State Park. The store is located in an original stone building constructed in 1858-59 by white settlers and leased in 1860 to Wah Hop, a Chinese merchant.

"The story of the Chinese in California is a very interesting and important part of California's history and is being told at such monuments as the Weaverville Joss Blouse State Historical Monument at Coloma, the Marshall Gold Discovery State Park, and Pueblo de Los Angeles. In the spring of 1846, two Chinese men and one woman arrived in San Francisco aboard the brig. Eagle - the first known Chinese immigrants in California," Dyson writes.

With the discovery of gold and the use of Chinese labor to help build the western section of the Central Pacific Railroad, hundreds of Chinese came to California bringing with them the customs of their homeland. They imported goods and food from China and lived mostly in their own communities, becoming practically self-supporting entities.

Actually, China was closer to the Chinese of California than the Eastern Seaboard was to Americans on the West Coast. That is one reason why there are so many examples of Chinese art, and furniture in the older homes of the state and it all blends beautifully with the antiques of early American settlers here. Consequently, ships sailing from Hong Kong carried all the material objects of the Chinese way of life.

Not having seen the Wah Hop store we will quote Dyson's description of it: "The Wah Hop store is sectionalized into areas which were used for a specific purpose - much the same as a modern store. The interior layout and arrangement was based on a building erected in 1851 in

the Chinese section of Fiddletown and known as Dr. Tee's office. In one corner is a brick stove and duck roasting oven and the area is equipped with cooking utensils and a dining area. Next is an altar containing the house of God. Candles and incense are burned at the altar. Rows of shelves contain large brown pottery jars for the storage of food. Shelves contain herbs and other materials used for medicine.

"Since the store was known as Wah Hop Store and Bank, an iron safe has been placed against the wall. The Chinese miners deposited their gold with Wah Hop for safekeeping. There is a butcher section with meat counter and chopping block. A 'roast pig' and 'roast duck' hang above the counter. The dry goods section contains straw hats, clothing, shoes, and some of the few things the Chinese bought from the Americans - boots and gold pans.

"Counters, on which have been fastened panels of wire mesh, some of which came from Chinese stores in Newcastle, allow the exhibit to be unattended and the visitor to enter into the room."

Prior to reconstruction, of the interior of the building, the wood floor was removed, and an archeological investigation made of the ground which revealed Chinese coins, broken pottery, dishes, tins, buttons, and other objects. From the disturbance of the earth the Chinese had evidently mined the original floor to the depth of at least five feet. Dyson observed. A dirt floor has been replaced.

Many of the store contents were obtained from the Chinese section of Newcastle which was demolished to make way for the U. S. 40 Freeway. Recently, the contents of a Chinese drug store were donated to the monument. The fixtures, wood carvings, and other objects will be incorporated into the present store.

Besides thanks to the personnel at the Marshall Gold Discovery State Park for their assistance in the construction of the exhibit, special thanks should be given Toon Fong, delineator of the Department of Water Resources, for his technical advice and assistance in obtaining the Chinese material for this exhibit; Shuck Chan of Placerville for his advice and information; Yue Fong of Sacramento for the donation of the Drug Store; and Mr. Chew of Fiddletown for allowing the Division of Beaches and parks to make sketches and photographs of Dr. Yee's office, so News and Views reports.