

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

March 13, 1968

Monterey Chinese

In the little handbook published in Monterey in 1875 there appears an interesting and different story of the life and work of the Chinese who formerly lived on the shores of the Monterey Bay. They had several settlements from time to time but the largest was at Point Alones now occupied by the Hopkins Marine Station.

In years gone by when some of us were children we can remember the Chinese who sold seashells at Point Joe and other places around the 17 Mile Drive, adding a great deal to the charm of the trip.

The following paragraphs are quotations from the 1875 booklet:

“Chinatown is distant from Monterey about one mile from the outskirts of the city on one of the numerous small bays that line the bay of Monterey. It is admirably selected for the business carried on by its enterprising citizens — fish curing and abalone shell shipping. Its inhabitants are frugal, industrious, and well behaved. Little or no crime occurs among them, and so far as our experience goes, they are a sober, honest set of men, and compare favorably with their countrymen throughout the state.

“ ‘Tim,’ a California-born Chinaman, speaks English and Spanish as fluently as a native. The census of Chinatown is as follows: Man Lee Company, six men, two women, and one child; Yee Lee Company, six men, two women, and three children; Man Sing Company, four men and one woman. In connection with these companies are those of Carmel, Pescadero, and Portuguese Bay-San Choy Lee Company, eleven men and one woman; Boo Lee Company, eight men, and Dai Lee Company, eight men. There are about twenty men and eight women outside these companies in different employments in the town and neighborhood.

“The Chinese industries are fishing for rockfish, cod, halibut, flounders, red and blue fish, yellow tail, mackerel, sardines and shellfish, the greater part of which are split open, salted, and dried in the sun for exportation to San Francisco, whence they find their way to the mines throughout the state, and abroad. It may be estimated that the amount of dried fish

exported from Monterey annually averages nearly 100 tons.

“The Chinese collect also great quantities of abalone shells, which find a ready market at \$20 a ton. They possess about twenty boats nearly all of which are built by themselves. They are sailed in Chinese fashion. During the past month they have commenced shipping fresh fish to Gilroy, San Jose, and other interior towns. Although they import from San Francisco the greater portion of their merchandise, they purchase very liberally of the merchants in town, and as their trade is always for cash, they are very desirable customers in these hard times.”

In 1875, the Sacramento Bee had this to say about Monterey: “There is no spot on the coast whose natural advantages are at all equal to Monterey. Santa Cruz is no comparison nor Santa Barbara either; but these places have the start, and only Yankee energy can bring Monterey up to them. The first thing needed is a good hotel, not in town, but near the woods and sea bathing. . . . There are many great and wealthy men in Monterey who could, if they would, build such a one as required; but they are natives and do not care for active life or investments of such character; they are easy, slow-going people, content to let what they deem well enough alone, and take no ventures of that character.

”The following item is from the Kern County Courier of the same year: “For many years no town in the state has been less known than Monterey. . . a quaint old Spanish town, without life or movement, and apparently belonging to some forgotten arcadian age. Yet for eighty years it was the most important town in California, the seat of government and the commercial center. . . The location of the old town is delightful — a gentle slope at the foot of the hills, of a moderate elevation, covered with evergreen trees and facing one of the finest harbors in the world. The climate is the most delightful that can be imagined. The only natural cause that brings life to a close there is old age.”