

百泉匯流
water from a hundred springs merging

In Search Of Chinese San Luis Obispo

Saturday, February 7, 1998

Sponsored by Heritage Shared & Cuesta College

New Perspectives on Gold Mountain

California is most often described as being the outer edge of the continent, the last frontier, and land's end. Our historical lexicon is filled with phrases that describe this east-to-west flow — Go West, beyond the 100th meridian, Manifest Destiny. None of this applies to immigration from China. To better understand Chinese immigration to California (and California history in general) we need to move our perspective from Greenwich, England, to a point high above the Hawaiian Islands.

From this viewpoint ... California becomes an integral part of the Pacific Basin. The presence of Asians in California history has always been treated as exotic, requiring special explanation, and yet when California is seen as but one shore of the Pacific, it becomes as logical for Asians to cross the Pacific to California as it was for Europeans to cross the Atlantic to the east coast of North America.

The Chinese have been viewed outside the mainstream of the Monterey Bay Region's historical, economic, and social development. Though the Chinese are not explicitly mentioned in the local and regional histories, if you hold each page to the light you can make out a faint pattern. The longer you look, the stronger the pattern becomes. The Chinese are in the very paper, they are the watermark.

— Sandy Lydon, *Chinese Gold*

Although human behaviors are not fully represented by objects found in the ground, such artifacts can provide evidence of rites or customs and can be used to test the conventional beliefs expressed in the English-language press and scholarship alike. Explained by some as a voluntary association for sociability and economic exchange, as a mechanism to guarantee the survival of traditional lifeways, or as a defensive response to hostility on the part of the host community, Chinatown's very existence eludes the assignment of any single cause or motivation.

—Roberta Greenwood, *Down by the Station*



Tong Yun Fow

Chinese junks had plied the California coast long before Spanish galleons arrived, but the first recorded Chinese did not appear in San Luis Obispo County until the mid-19th century. Like most other local immigrants they were pushed by hard times at home and pulled by dreams of California gold. The stories of these pioneers and their descendants are tales of enterprise, persistence, and family ties.

Chinese labor fueled local economic development. Immigrant domestics cooked and washed in homes and ranches throughout the county. There were settlements of Chinese fisherfolk, abalone and seaweed harvesters along the coast, enclaves of miners in Cambria, Adelaida, and La Panza, farming hamlets from San Miguel to Guadalupe. Chinese labor was the backbone of local road, railroad, and heavy construction.

The focal point of Chinese San Luis Obispo was the 800 block of Palm Street. Residents called their community Tong Yun Fow, or “Chinese People’s City”; most other locals called it Chinatown, or simply “Palm Street.” Between 1870 and 1900 its population varied from two to four hundred, peaking in the early 1890s when one in every ten San Luis city residents was Chinese. The most enduring Palm Street families were the Wongs and the Gins. Patriarchs Wong On (later Ah Louis) and Gin Sai Yuen (Quong Chung) became leading merchants, entrepreneurs, labor agents, and community spokesmen. Palm Street businesses were mostly extended family enterprises, anchored by Ah Louis’s two-story brick store.

Even in a small town like San Luis Obispo, Palm Street was a place apart, a safe haven for the Chinese and an alien presence for the white community. Mutual economic needs, however, bound the two communities closely together. In the twentieth century Palm Street declined as the pioneer generation aged, federal policy blocked new immigration, and the Great Depression took its toll in the old neighborhood. By 1950 only fifty Chinese residents remained in San Luis city, only one hundred county-wide.

Today the only physical remains of Tong Yun Fow are the Ah Louis Store, the Shanghai Low and Mee Heng Low restaurant buildings, the Chong’s Hand Made Candies building, and archaeological artifacts. But families, memories and rich traditions live on, now reinforced and energized by a new influx of Chinese students and professional people.



Program

8:30-9:00 Registration

9:00-9:15 Welcome

*Grace Mitchell, President, Cuesta College
Howard S. Miller, President, Heritage Shared*

9:15-9:45 Cal Poly Lion Dancers

9:45-10:30 Sandy Lydon

*The Chinese at the Bottom of the Hole: Chinese Immigrants and the
History of the California Coast*



10:45-12:15

Charlie Chin

*History Alive! Presents
Dr. Yee Fung Cheung*

12:15-1:15 Lunch and Conversation

1:15-2:00 Roberta Greenwood

*How Archaeology Contributes to the Knowledge of Chinatown
Development*

2:00-2:30 John Parker

*Sorting through Five Tons of San Luis Obispo History: The
Archaeology of the Palm Street Chinatown*

2:30-3:00 Book Signing

Roberta Greenwood and Sandy Lydon

3:00-4:45 Lynne Landwehr and Paula Juelke Carr

*In Search of Chinese San Luis Obispo:
An Open Forum for Sharing Discoveries, Questions, Experiences*

4:45-5:00 Closing

Dennis Judd, Vice President, Heritage Shared



Presenters

CAL POLY LION DANCERS are members of the Cal Poly Chinese Student Association.

PAULA JUELKE CARR is an independent historian, cultural resource researcher, and museum exhibit developer. She currently serves on the San Luis Obispo Cultural Heritage Committee.

CHARLIE CHIN is an independent writer, actor, Asian Studies scholar, and former Education Director of the New York Chinatown History Museum. As a featured performer in the California Council for the Humanities *History Alive!* Program, he portrays Dr. Yee Fung Cheung, a California gold rush-era Chinese herbalist.

ROBERTA GREENWOOD, founder of Greenwood & Associates, is a widely published archaeologist with special expertise on California Chinese communities. She has received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Society for California Archaeology. Her book, *Down by the Station: Los Angeles Chinatown, 1880-1933* (1996), won the Cotsen Prize Imprint for Outstanding Studies in Archaeology.

DENNIS JUDD teaches history at Cuesta College, and since 1975 has been an interpretive guide at the Hearst San Simeon State Historical Monument. He has conducted numerous oral history interviews, directed internships, and taught Elderhostel programs.

LYNNE LANDWEHR is a writer and editor, currently researching a history of the San Luis Obispo Chinatown. She serves on the staff of the San Luis Obispo County Historical Museum.

SANDY LYDON is a Professor of History at Cabrillo College, and Adjunct Professor of History at California State University, Monterey. His book, *Chinese Gold: The Chinese in the Monterey Bay* (1985), won the Book of the Year Award from the Association of Asian-American Studies.

HOWARD S. MILLER has taught and published American social, technological, and urban history, developed curricula and public programming, and co-curated major museum exhibits. He is Emeritus Professor of History, University of Missouri-St. Louis.

JOHN PARKER has directed archaeological and historical research projects, conducted field schools, and taught related college level courses. He is founder of Parker & Associates, an archaeological consulting firm, and currently directs the San Luis Obispo Palm Street Archaeological Project.



Coming into Focus through Archaeology

Archaeology provides the perfect complement to historical research, revealing details of daily life in the Chinese community established on Palm Street in San Luis Obispo during the 1870s.

Peeling back the layers of time, archaeologists chart changes in people and places. On Palm Street the lowest layers hold evidence of a nearby Native American village, whose inhabitants later became neophytes working at the growing mission complex. More recent levels show a Mexican pueblo forming around the church, and still later, artifacts from a Chinese settlement on the former mission grounds. Archaeology deciphers the stories hidden in the pink plastered walls of unknown adobes, and in the redwood root cellars and trash pits of Chinatown.

Piecing together excavated personal effects, archaeologists reconstruct their former owners' lives. Combs, buttons, pipes, toothbrushes, and rings are datable evidence that fills in details. Parts of dishes, food containers, bottles and utensils offer clues to their makers and places of origin. Burned and butchered bones provide evidence of economic patterns and cultural lifeways.

Sometimes archaeologists discover the most important information in the seemingly most insignificant and subtle of artifacts. Seeds are indicators of dietary practices, trade relations, and even climate change. Pieces of coke screened from an excavation mark the location of a nearby Chinese washhouse, and show that its owners bought their fuel from the San Luis Obispo Gas Works on Dana Street.

Archaeologists only begin their work at the dig site. The crucial next steps are painstaking processing and analysis in the lab, and the preparation of a written report. Here archaeology and history meet, bringing the people of Palm Street into clearer focus, enriching the heritage of San Luis Obispo.



HERITAGE SHARED

Memory fades into history by degrees, and history easily slides unnoticed into oblivion. Everyone has a stake in preserving the past because we can't know who we are unless we know who we were.

Heritage Shared is dedicated to inclusive, participatory community history. Our mission is to make our varied but shared pasts accessible and meaningful to all. Our activities include historical research and interpretation, educational programming, publications, preserving and exhibiting historical materials, sponsoring public events, and fostering cooperation among Central Coast historical organizations. The Directors of Heritage Shared are Betsy Bertrando, Paula Juelke Carr, Astrid Gallagher, Dennis Judd, and Howard S. Miller.

If you share our goals, please join us.

For further information contact
Paula Juelke Carr (805) 541-1201,
or Astrid Gallagher (805) 549-9283, or write
Heritage Shared at P.O. Box 4614, San Luis Obispo, CA 93403.



Dedication

This forum is dedicated to the San Luis Obispo Chinese community and to the lab volunteers, under the direction of Dr. John Parker, who are tirelessly processing the artifacts recovered during archaeological excavations prior to the building of the Palm Street Parking Garage in the City of San Luis Obispo.

Acknowledgments

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