

Quarterly Bulletin of the Calaveras County Historical Society
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THE CHINESE IN CALAVERAS COUNTY

The Chinese came to Calaveras County in search of gold; they erected buildings. . . . conducted businessesbut as unobtrusively as they came they left . . . leaving few traces of their contribution to the history of our county.

But they were here in vast numbers; in fact, almost every Mother Lode town had a Chinese settlement. From Big Bar on the Mokelumne River to Murphys, from West Point to Copperopolis there were Chinese.

BIG BAR

The placer deposits along Big Bar were extremely rich. Its wealth became known and lured many men, including a number of Chinese. The Chinese miners were active in this area during the 1870's and 1880's. The last Chinese miner to reside there was Tiddle Lee. He grew old there and was held in esteem by all who knew him. He was the last of an era at Big Bar.*

MOKELUMNE HILL

Chinatown in Mokelumne Hill was located on East Center Street. It extended north down China Gulch and south along Avenue K to Lafayette Street and was considered one of the largest Chinatowns in the mining region. According to old residents the large Joss House burned in a fire in 1898. The buildings in Chinatown consisted of wooden structures with the exception of several adobe buildings on Avenue K. The last Chinese resident in Chinatown was reputed to be one "Ah Sam". Chinatown had other disasters besides the fire in 1898. In 1861-62 heavy rains pounded California. Water flooded the streets of Mokelumne Hill and washed away some of the smaller buildings

*Big Bar History, a paper, compiled by Emmett P. Joy, 1963.

located in the gulches and lower Chinatown.

Fires also plagued the town, and on September 4, 1874 a fire started in Chinatown and spread up the east side of Main Street leaving the eastern and southern part of the town in ashes.*

There were happy times, however. In fact, the first marriage celebrated in California between celestials occurred in 1853 when Keong Ashing of Hong Kong was wed to Miss Ahew of Tit Sing Empire of China. The ceremony was performed by Hon. Henry Eno at Mokelumne Hill.*

Last summer the citizens of Mokelumne Hill voted to change the names of the town's streets to those of historic significance. They selected "China Gulch" to replace old Avenue K.

*"The Annals of Mokelumne Hill" by Emmett P. Joy, Pub. 1968.

*Calaveras Chronicle, August 29, 1853.



Gravestone that once marked the burial place of a Mokelumne Hill Celestial.

Photo courtesy Presley Peek

SAN ANDREAS

St. Charles Street where Court Street intersects was the site of Chinatown in the 1870's. Their Joss House was located where Calaveras High School now stands. The cemetery was on the hill behind the Joss House and there was also a graveyard on the west side of the present road to Calaveras Cement Plant. The official map of San Andreas in 1882 shows about fourteen lots of Chinese ownership.

Ed Note: Larry Getchell was born in Sheep Ranch, but was brought up in San Andreas. He is the son of the late Ulysses Grant Getchell, the nephew of the well-known editor Clarence Getchell, and the grandson of George Washington Getchell, a pioneer in Calaveras County. Larry's exceptional memory of things his father and others told him, and his own memories of growing up in

Calaveras County, coupled with his verve and easy style in the telling of life here in the days gone by, make him one of our favorite sources of local history. His sympathetic account of the Orientals in San Andreas, and of his friend, Chinese Louie, we think well worth recording here.

As late as the 1860's and '70's the Chinese in San Andreas represented nearly half its population, they alone totalling nearly 1500 persons.

Gold mining provided them with their principal livelihood, but not all Chinese were miners. During the '70's quartz or hard rock mining had mostly replaced the gold pan and individual mining claim, that is for all except the Chinese. They found it profitable to rework the gravel beds of the streams long since abandoned by miners of the '50's and '60's.



The Joss House in San Andreas, once the temple of worship for the Chinese in this area, was built in 1857. It stood on the site of Calaveras High School. It contained many small rooms, corridors, an altar and a prayer mat, and the walls

were covered with bright red and gold thin paper. The priest in his elder years is shown about 1903 posing with the George Treat children and friends. He lived in an apartment adjoining the Joss House.

Photo courtesy Eva Soracco



THE "CHINEE" PRIEST

The last Chinese priest in San Andreas gave this photo of himself as a young man to his friend, Mrs. Theresa Rivara.

Photo courtesy Eva Soracco

Through long hours of back-breaking work they were able to mine sufficient gold to maintain themselves and their contemporaries residing in San Andreas. The latter settled along China Street (now St. Charles St.) starting almost at the intersection of Main Street, on down the hill and for a considerable distance along the lower flat.

These first generation Chinese patterned their everyday life, their housing and customs as nearly like that of their original homeland as possible.

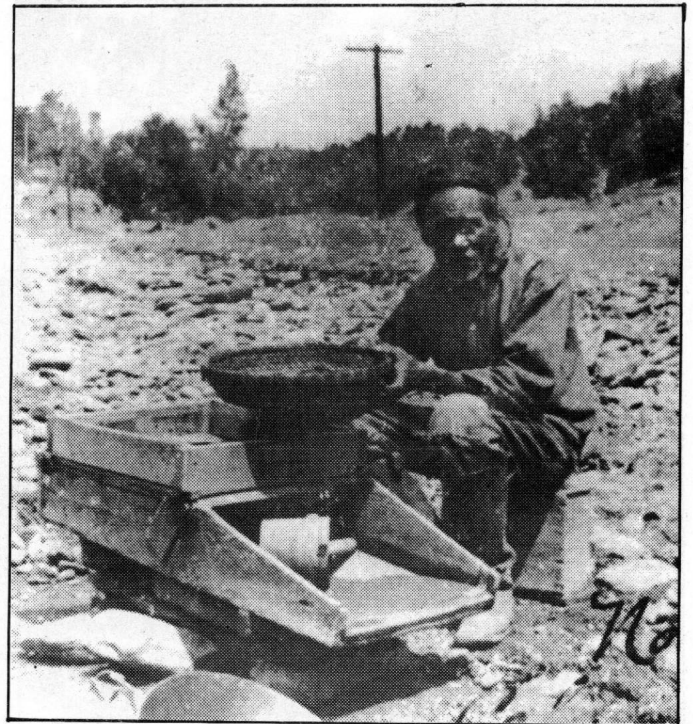
China Street in San Andreas was the "Poor man's version of today's Grant Avenue, Chinatown, San Francisco." The buildings stood side-by-side with usually one entrance and without any space between. Scrolls and cupolas gaily colored red and trimmed in gold, gave the scene an appearance typical of old China.

As one journeyed along the solid front of this Chinese artificial splendor, the sweet odor of incense would drift from within, triggering one's imagination of dark secrets enclosed behind Oriental decorated doors. Tales of opium dens and subterranean passages where dark deeds were planned were commonly discussed and believed.

The Chinese community with stores along China Street, was a self-contained group of people. Their principal customers, the Chinese miners from the outskirts, did their shopping mostly on Sundays. This was not for religious principles as they were non-Christians, often referred to as the "Heathen Chinese". Their needs were simple but when financially feasible did indulge in luxuries of Chinese origin such as Chinese roast duck always on display in the shop windows.

The traditional Chinese laundry catered to Causasian needs and a Chinese dinner could be enjoyed in a number of Chinese restaurants.

According to my father, my principal source of information, Sunday was a very busy day for the Chinese community. During the morning hours a steady stream of Chinese would file over the Catholic Church hill, a short pole and sack carried on their shoulder. Their gold was exchanged in town for the necessities of life, with much haggling and bargaining, according to Chinese custom. Some found time to visit the splended Chinese Church located on the site of the present high school. As a boy I found it great fun to explore the old abandoned church. It still had many



CELESTIAL MINER

Ah-Se-One, as he searched for gold in Calaveras County. He lived in a cabin near North Branch, and was one of the last Chinese miners in the county.

Photo courtesy Eva Soracco

treasures to offer, such as Chinese money with the square hole in the center, containers of incense, and glint and glitter everywhere. The murky odor of the incense added to the excitement of exploring the old ruins and I am ashamed to admit, we kids hastened the final collapse of the old majestic edifice. A few years back, while browsing through the Murphys Museum, Dr. Wood showed me a picture of the Church in its original splendor and a handsome building it was.

Following Sunday morning shopping and with the afternoon slipping away our visiting Chinese began the slow walk up and over the Church hill, their sacks now much fuller than earlier in the day, their destination back to the less pretentious shacks serving as their home at the river's edge. The steady file of Chinese approaching town in the morning now was a steady line in reverse, pleasure and business being completed.

One is hard put to find a Chinese in Calaveras County today. As the placer mining gradually ran its course for the Chinese, they one-by-one moved either to metropolitan centers or for the for-

unate few, back to China with the means to live out their life in leisure.

CHINESE LOUIE

As the 19th century drew to a close, the Chinese in San Andreas had, for the most part, drifted away, except for a few families. . . mostly elderly folk who for one reason or another stayed behind. One exception was Louie, whose last name, if he had one, was either Ching, Chang or Chung. Louie was a comparatively young Chinaman who cast his lot with Calaveras County for better or worse.

I first remember Louie around 1912 when he was cooking at the old Metropolitan Hotel in San Andreas, owned at the time by the Goodell family. It was a practice of the hotel to hire a dishwasher from time to time to help Louie and during one summer vacation I held the job. The result was I got to know him quite well.

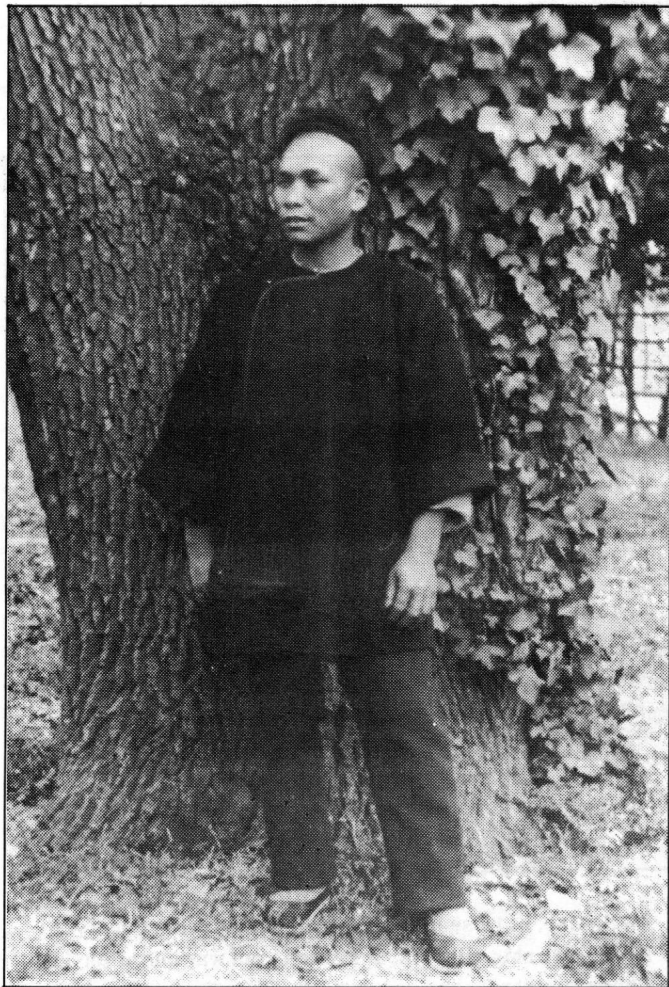
He was fond of young people and I always felt I was one of his favorites. He particularly liked the Goodell children, especially the oldest daughter, Genevieve, who happened to be about my age. We were both very blond and folks took delight in teasing us about one another. At our age the opposite sex was to be tolerated only when absolutely necessary. Louie didn't help our relationship any, although I am sure his intentions were of the best. He had a Chinese accent second to none I ever heard. During a slack in our duties he would turn to me and ask, "You lovey Gen O E?" My reaction to this was mostly embarrassment, but between blushes I could usually offer a denial of sorts.

Louie had a little trouble with names and never attempted my first or full name - he addressed me as "Gitsu" for Getchell and in later years added a Mr., so it was "Mr. Gitsu, you see Gen O E lately?"

Louie was a Cantonese and he maintained some contact with his old home in China. He subscribed to a Chinese newspaper, which was probably published in San Francisco. From time to time he would receive packages from China. The most intriguing of these to me was a box of medication, the likes of which was unusual to say the least.

Louie apparently suffered from stomach disorder and the medicine was taken as a sort of tea steeped on the stove. The outside of the box was illustrated to show the contents and I positively assure you, the illustrations were of bugs, beetles and other sundry species of the insect family. This was too much so on the sly I succeeded in glimpsing the actual contents inside. Bugs alright, carefully dried and in skelton form. A lose comparison would be they resembled a carton of mixed nuts.

During rush hours my dishwashing job would get a little hectic. The dishes were anything but Haviland china, being especially heavy duty and weighing several pounds each, it seemed to me. I had to keep Louie supplied with clean dishes as our stock was not too large. When things got a little too rough, Louie would jump in



A Calaveras Chinaman

and help with the washing - he could make those dishes fly. Maybe he was trying to tell me something.

While I was attending grammar school, Louie had a nephew arrive from China and he attended school for a time. Chang, we called him and he had quite a difficult time because of the language barrier. Some of the older boys in school would tease Chang, but he always took it good naturedly. He was happy-go-lucky and would laugh at most anything.

One day when we were playing baseball he volunteered to catch. Disdaining to wear a mask for protection he took his place behind the batter, and, of course, got hit smack in the kisser with a foul ball. Would you believe it, he laughed louder than usual and returned immediately to catching again. For reasons I never knew, Chang had to return to China after a short stay. We missed him.

After cooking at the Metropolitan for several years, Louie looked for greener pastures, deciding to try his hand at running a restaurant. Business prospects looked better in Angels Camp where he moved, forming a partnership with another Chinese friend, who it seems to me we also called Louie.

They opened a place of business just behind Main Street on the West side. The entrance was by the bridge ramp over the Angels Creek. He was missed by the small fry of San Andreas, but it wasn't too long before many of us renewed our acquaintance by visiting him in Angels. The price of an egg sandwich or a piece of apple pie was just right for us and it seemed quite an adventure to walk through the alley and over the bridge, as the water rushed by below, and through the screen door to Louie's place. We could har-

dly wait to yell, "Hello Louie" and he would respond in kind and generally ask, "You from Sana Dra?" To me he would add, "Hello, Mr. Gitsu, you see Gen O E lately?"

Louie's lot as a restaurant owner was never an easy one. With just his partner and himself and the restaurant open twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, there wasn't much spare time except for poker playing during their twelve hours off.

Both partners were badly bitten by the poker bug and immediately upon finishing a twelve-hour shift would head straight for a poker parlor. Just how they fared in their games I cannot say, but apparently they held their own as they continued to play down through the years. It was about their only pleasure if perhaps their main vice.

As time passed and I left the county, meetings with my friend were infrequent; but, whenever I visited San Andreas, coming home was hardly complete without dropping in to see Louie at his restaurant.

Although several years have passed since the visits to Louie's restaurant, Mr. Getchell's memories of his friend and of his father's recollections of the Chinese in San Andreas are still very vivid in his mind.

ANGELS CAMP

Although only two structures remain today of Chinatown (the brick portion of the Bird residence and the City Jail) a town survey map completed December 17, 1874, by A. B. Beauvais, shows a lot on Main Street owned by a Chinaman, and 17 other lots under Chinese ownership.

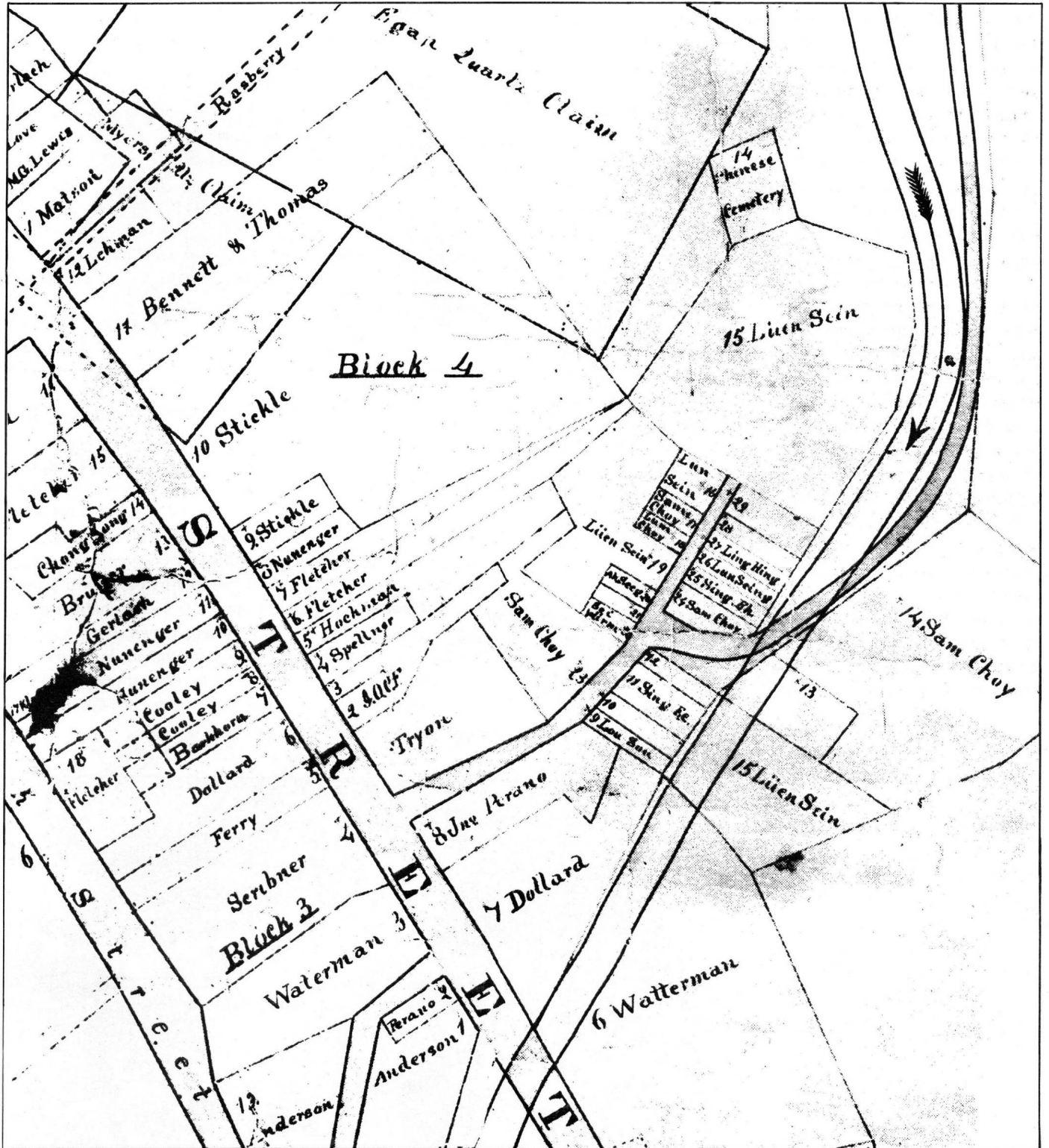
The Celestials were invertebrate gamblers, one game being fan tan. They also played other card games in which they were often joined by the whites. "Near Altaville lived a bad character, who, on one occasion, went down to O'BYRNE'S Ferry and indulged in gambling with the Chinese. When the stakes became large on the table he covered the Chinese with a pistol, raked in the gold dust and departed. A short time later he returned and again took the stakes.

"The Chinese were prepared for this, caught him, bound his hands and feet, sewed him in a blanket and threw him in the river. The authorities didn't investigate the matter, considering it good riddance."

***Las Calaveras, October, 1963.**

California Historical Society





Part of a map of Angels Camp, showing the location of Chinese-owned lots and businesses in the vicinity of Bird Way.

Courtesy of Earnest Long

A description of the area in the early 1850's notes: "I went on in a few days to Angel's Camp, a village some miles farther south, composed of well-built wooden houses, and altogether a more respectable and civilized-looking place than San Andres. The inhabitants were nearly all Americans, which no doubt accounted for the circumstance.

"While walking round the diggings in the afternoon, I came upon a Chinese camp in a gulch near the village. About a hundred Chinamen had here pitched their tents on a rocky eminence by the side of their diggings. When I passed they were at dinner or supper, and had all the curious little pots and pans and other "fix-ins" I had seen in every Chinese camp and were eating the same dubious-looking articles which excited in the mind of an outside barbarian a certain degree of curiosity to know what they are composed of but not the slightest desire to graftify it by the sense of taste. I was very hospitably asked to partake of the good things which I declined; but as I would not eat, they insisted on my drinking, and poured me out a pannikin full of brandy, which they seemed rather surprised I did not empty. They also gave me some of the cigaritas, the tobacco of which is aromatic, and very pleasant to smoke, though wrapped up in too much paper.

"The Chinese invariably treated in the same hospitable manner any one who visited their camps, and seemed rather pleased than otherwise at the interest and curiosity excited by their domestic arrangements."*

The camp described above was gradually enhanced with wooden buildings and two brick buildings on both sides of Angels Creek back of the Angels Hotel, and an adobe building and two wooden buildings across the creek. The Chinese cemetery ad-

*The Gold Hunters, J. D. Borthwick, 1857.



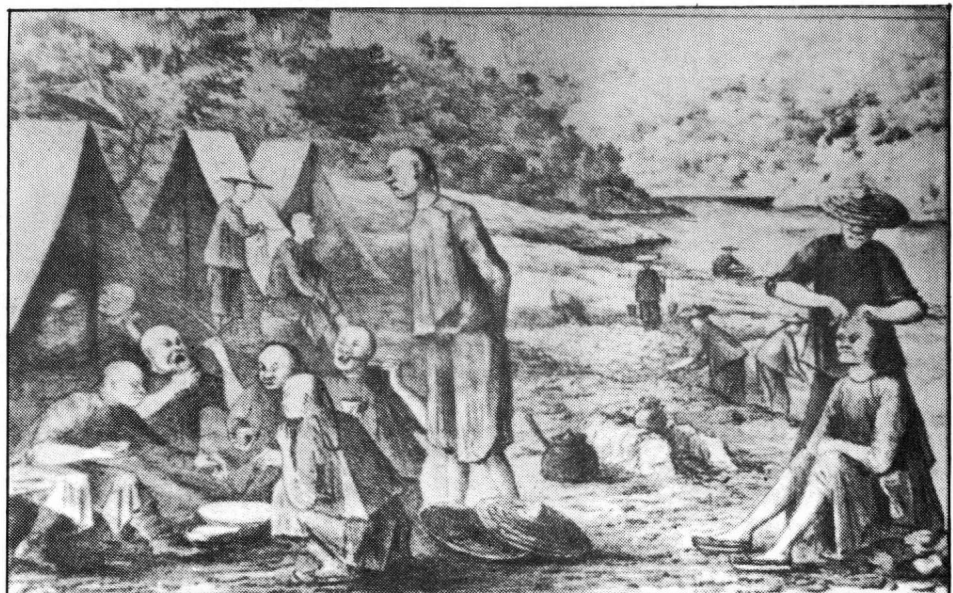
Placer mining with rocker.

From Overland Monthly, August, 1891.

joined the village upstream.*

One of the largest land holders in 1874 was one Sam Choy. His daughter, Ah Nee, was born in Angels Camp and was a favorite of all the townspeople. "As September 1883 drew to a close not only the school children were saddened, but the entire community as well, for Sam Choy suddenly made the announcement that it was his intention to send his exquisite little girl, Ah Nee, born in Angels Camp, to China that she might enter the society befitting her rank. Her father was a merchant widely known throughout the Southern Mines of California. His establishment in Chinatown Road in Angel's Camp was long remembered by the first settlers; all respected the distinguished and silken-sheathed Chinese gen-

✓*Las Calaveras, October 1963.



A camp of Chinese miners near their claims.

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tleman, Sam Choy. The following was written by a younger sister of Mrs. Charles Cosgrove, who, with Mrs. John Peirano and the latter's daughter, Nettie, neighbors, regretted to see Ah Nee leave her father's home in Chinatown Road quite as much as her playmates in the town:

The children in Chinatown cried today -
 Sam Choy has taken Ah Nee away;
 He took the bands from off her feet
 Her pointed slippers were gay and neat;
 Green was the jade entwining her hair.
 He sent to China for silken clothes
 Out of the bales sandlewood rose
 In garments of lilac, amber and blue
 Like a dainty butterfly from the sky
 She tossed her peacock fan up high;
 It hid from us the tear in her eye
 As she waved a brave and fond goodbye.
 Sam Choy wanted Ah Nee to be a lady.
 So he sent her away to Celestial Land;
 Where the peach blossoms blow.
 The children in Chinatown cried today -
 Sam Choy has taken Ah Nee Away."*

**"Pioneer Days of Angel's Camp", Buckbee, 1932

MELONES

Hundreds of Chinese miners rocked their "cradles" along the Stanislaus River. At Melones some patient "John Chinaman"

was to be seen in his rough board shack, plastered on the inside with small pieces of vermilion paper, good luck mottos, or perhaps warnings to the Chinese devils to keep out, blowing sprays of water from his mouth over "boiled" shirts, white linen coats and trousers.*

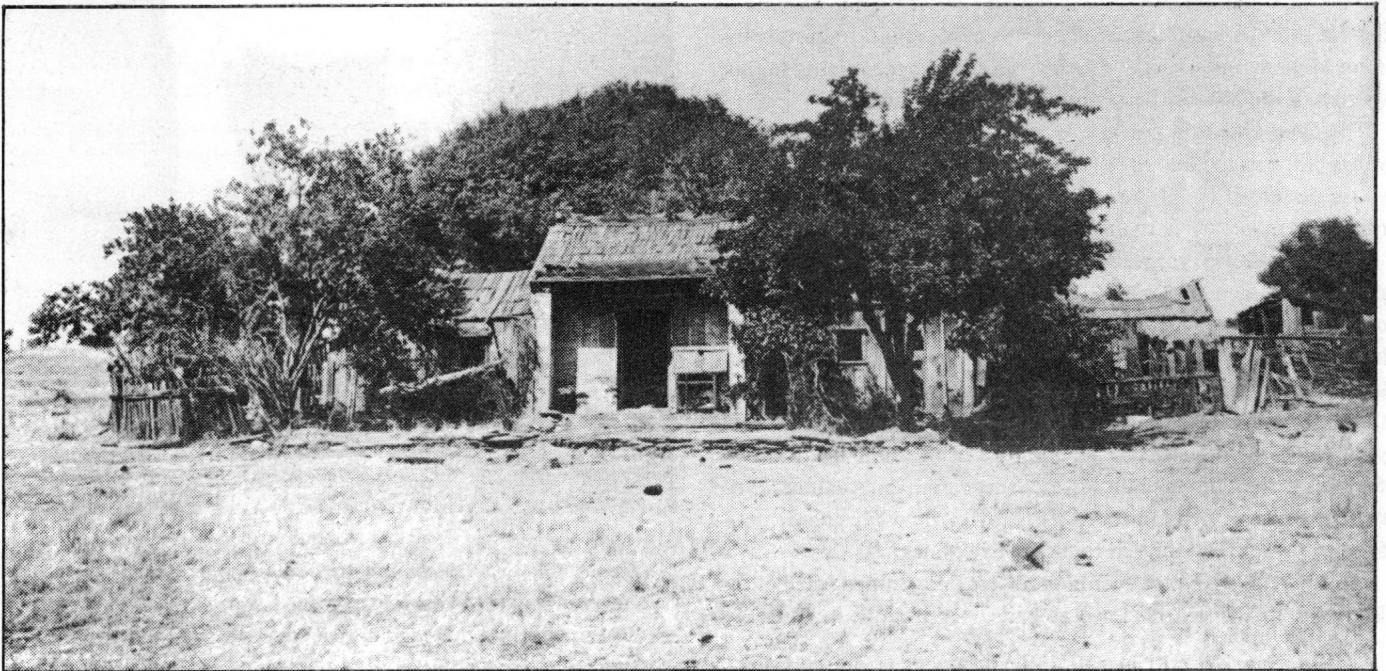
*"Stockton Daily Evening Record", supplement "Communities of Central California and the Mother Lode", undated.

JENNY LIND

During the 'fifties Jenny Lind's Chinese population was of no small number, and the Chinese section of the camp, with alleyways and zig-zig lanes, wound crazily for a half-mile. Ghostly ruins of "melting" adobe, now gone entirely, marked what was once the fantastically decorated Joss House of the district. In its day, brightly colored strips of paper punched with countless holes fluttered like confetti from the doorways and eaves of the roofs. The holes in the paper were to show the progress of evil spirits in hot pursuit of the departed. The more numerous the holes in the papers the longer time it was supposed to take the evil spirits to pass through them.*

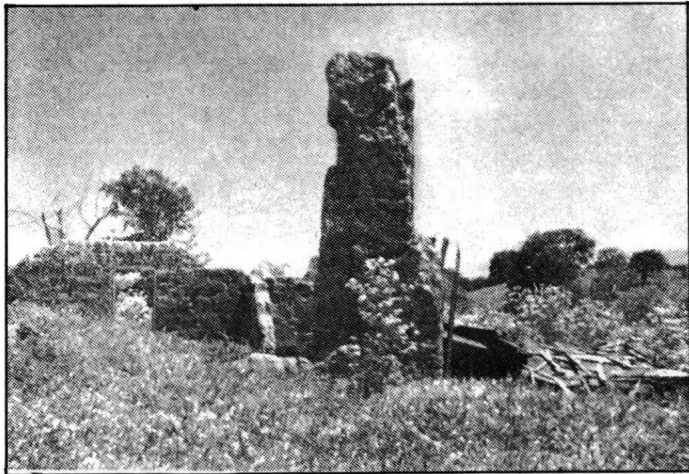
Chinatown at Jenny Lind commenced near the present IOOF Hall and extended south toward the Calaveras River. East of Chinatown on the hillside was the Chinese cemetery.

*"Mother Lode Album", Otheto Weston, 1948.



The abandoned and disintegrating Joss House located on the site of the present Calaveras High School.

Photo courtesy Eva Soracco.



JENNY LIND JOSS HOUSE

Ruins of the Joss House at Jenny Lind, as they appeared in 1948.

From Otheto Weston Mother Lode Album

One of the last Chinese to reside in Jenny Lind was Ah Lin, who mined along the Calaveras River. The following clipping came from a San Francisco newspaper at the time of his death:

AH LIN HAS PANNED HIS LAST STREAM

"Ah Lin is dead; - to many those words will mean little or nothing, but to those residents and lovers of the Mother Lode it means that another of the Pioneers of California has become a legend. Ah Lin was found dead outside of his cabin yesterday by John Meyers and with the death of An Lin, placer mining in this section of the Mother Lode has suffered its demise.

The aged Chinaman, who was reputed to be over one hundred years old, was the last to follow that method of mining. For sixty years he mined his claim on the river and until two years ago, managed to eke out a living from the seemingly barren rocks.

For the past two years, Ah Lin, infirm with age, has been supported by the county, Frank Sinclair, and the Rosenburg Brothers of San Francisco. With the ancient miner's death, Frank Sinclair has lost a tenant of sixty-one years. Since the year of 1870, Ah Lin has lived in a cabin donated by Sinclair. (And even the power of the Southern Pacific Railroad could not eject him from it. Several years ago when the S.P. was building a branch line from Valley Springs to the cement plant at San Andreas, Ah Lin's cabin was on the right-of-way. Ah Lin refused to move or leave his home until finally the railroad agreed to move his cabin.)*

Ah Lin goes with that ever hopeful and determined spirit of the Pioneers in the search for Eldorado. "Sometime makum foo

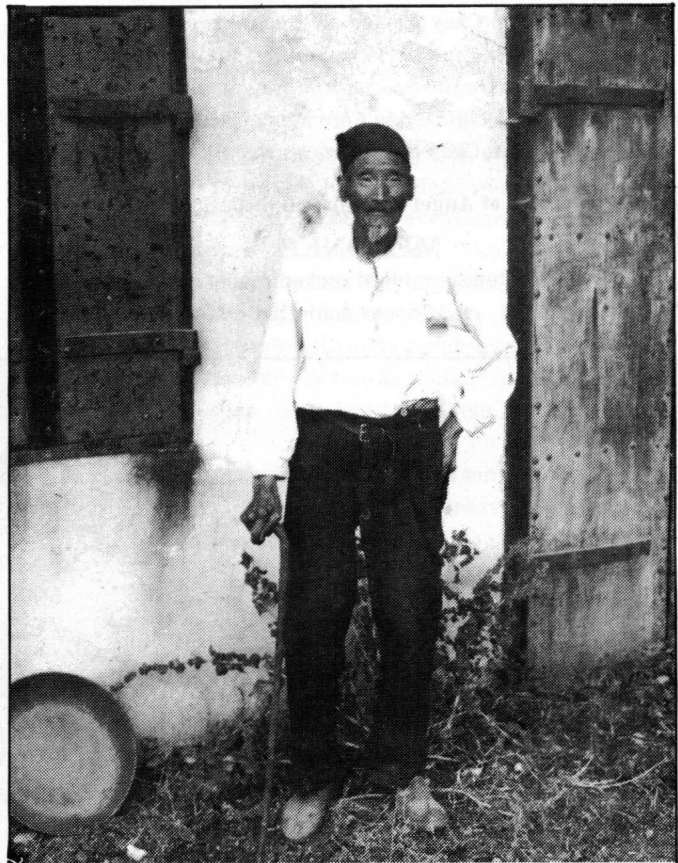
***Ed. Note: No corroboration can be found for this, perhaps it was a bit of color added by the reporter.**

bittee, sometime dollah, sometime dollah hap," he would say. "Maybe sometime strikee lich". But Ah Lin never did "strikee lich". Do we say never? For Ah Lin was rich; and who knows that he has not now found that long lost gold mine in the sky?

Unfortunately when pannings were good, there were always the Chuck-A-Luck games to lure the yellow metal from his hands.

Ah Lin, poor though he was, will not be laid in a potter's grave, as were many of his countrymen, for Ah Lin has a friend of Abraham Rosenburg of San Francisco, a fruit shipper who was born and raised at Jenny Lind. Rosenburg died last year, but in his will he left provisions for the last days of Ah Lin and the final placing of a tombstone. So, tomorrow afternoon at two o'clock, Ah Lin will be laid to rest with the dignity and reverence of a grand old man.*

***From a San Francisco newspaper, late 1920's, sent to Ira Shank by Mrs. Thelma Hepper.**



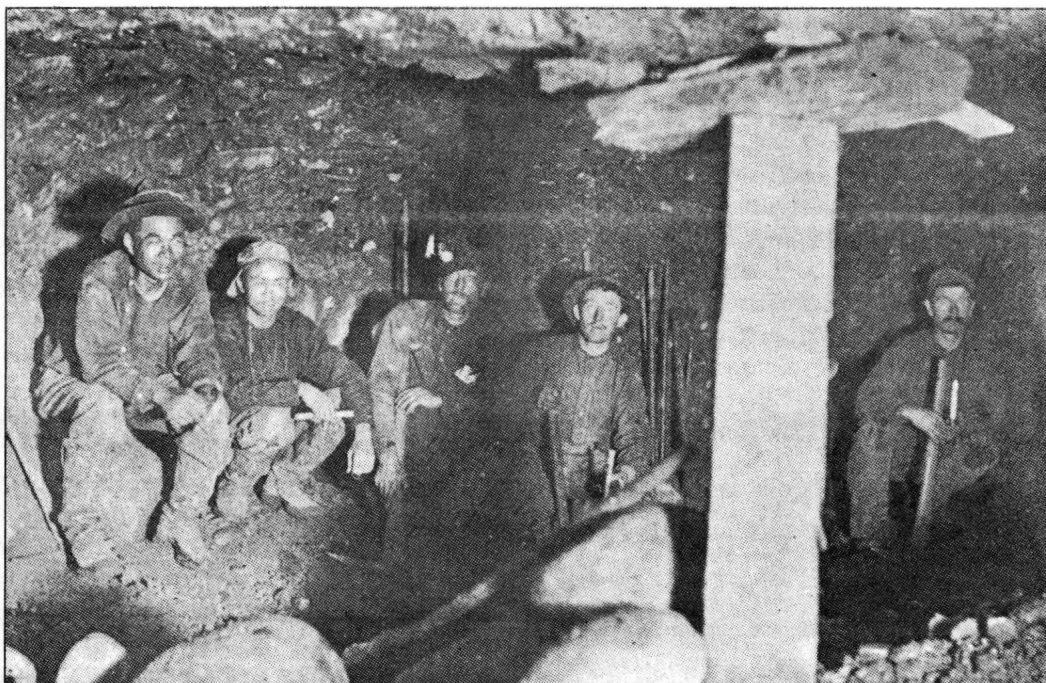
AH LIN

One of the last Chinamen in Jenny Lind, Ah Lin was a familiar figure to residents in that area. He was an active miner and could be found at most times along the Calaveras River.

Photo from the Historical Society files.

OCCIDENTALS AND CELESTIALS IN A DEEP MINE

The Chinaman preferred the placer method of mining and as a whole stayed above ground. There were a few exceptions, as this above photo shows.* In Calaveras County there was one miner, Ah-Sing, who worked the deep mines as well as the surface. He was employed at the "Union Chief" and the Reed Mine, both underground operations. California Miners Association, 1901



Throughout the county the Chinaman panned the streams for gold. Those who found mining not to their taste catered to the Occidentals by providing vegetables from their gardens, laundry services, restaurants, or they provided gambling houses for their countrymen. There were Chinese settlements in North Branch, Rail Road Flat, Calaveritas, Camanche, Campo Seco, West Point, Douglas Flat, Murphys, and Vallecito.

According to the History of California Labor Legislation "In 1858 areas of the Mother Lode gave notice to all Chinese to 'leave within 10 days from this date, any failing to comply shall be subjected to thirty-nine lashes and moved by force of arms.' Justice and ethics failed to exist in some towns, while in others like Vallecito, any Chinese who owned mining claims were exempted

from the 10-day order and were given 90 days in which to sell out and leave."

And so through the years, the Chinaman was finally forced to leave. . . with little evidence of where he once lived. But if you look around, there is one reminder of that once thriving culture, the Chinese "Tree of Heaven". The Chinese brought this tree with them to the mines. The Ailanthus has taken root in the old mining camps and it is a gift of the Chinese who came to work the diggings but found their wealth catering to the needs of the Occidentals.*

Over a century has passed since the first Ailanthus was brought here but they still exist as a monument to the memory of our Oriental heritage.

*"History of California Labor Legislation", Eaves, p. 118.

*"Echoes From Calaveras Ghost Towns", a paper, compiled by Emmett P. Joy, January, 1966.



NOTE TO READERS

For those interested in further study of the Chinese in California and along the Mother Lode, we suggest "Pigtails and Gold Dust," by Alexander McLeod, 1947, Caxton Printers, as a starting point. The Chinese Historical Society, San Francisco and the San Francisco Public Library collections also. "Las Calaveras" in its issues for April, July and October, 1963, and January, 1964, carried articles on the Chinese of our local communities. Pictures of Chinese in Mokelumne Hill appeared in the April, 1971 "Las Calaveras".

An eastern society wrote to us recently, asking for pictures of Chinese. They are compiling a pictorial record of the subject.

