

## **The History of Chinese in Monterey County**

Chinese have a rich heritage in California. The first large contingent of Chinese to arrive came to participate in the 1849 Gold Rush. Many stayed on after the height of the search for gold, playing a crucial role in construction of the transcontinental railroad, building the most difficult leg from Sacramento to Utah through the towering Sierra Nevada mountains. They built other railways, including the first route to link San Francisco to the Monterey Peninsula.

These initial forays were composed entirely of men. It was an intrepid group of families on a handful of traditional 30-foot junks that set out from Guangdong Province in 1851, sailing up the coast of China, past Japan, across the northern rim of the Pacific Ocean and then down the Canadian coast, ultimately landing in California, that brought the first women and children to the United States. One ship landed in Mendocino County north of San Francisco, and one landed at the mouth of the Carmel River. First establishing a village at Point Lobos (now a California State Park), they would soon occupy a site in Pebble Beach and at Point Alones on what is now the site of the Hopkins Marine Station.

While indigenous people of the Central Coast had relied on fishing for food for centuries, the Chinese were the first to engage in commercial fishing anywhere on Monterey Bay. The village at Point Alones became the focal point of fishing and Chinese settlement, with a population of 200 within a decade and perhaps as many as 400 by the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This settlement preceded the establishment of any presence in what is now the City of Pacific Grove by more than two decades. The children born in these three villages were the first Chinese Americans anywhere in the U.S.

Point Alones was a vibrant community. In the first years of existence, the fishermen were able to harvest vast numbers of abalone which flourished in the absence of sea otters. They removed the meat and dried it, and then shipped it to San Francisco for onward delivery to Guangdong where it was highly prized as a delicacy. They also caught salmon, halibut, rockfish, sardines and harvested seaweed, some sold to communities on the Monterey Bay coastline, others dried and shipped to San Francisco where it was famous among Chinese residents for its flavor. In 1867 it is reported that they shipped over 100 tons of fish to San Francisco. In the latter years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Portuguese, Japanese and Italians dominated daytime fishing. The Chinese adapted by becoming the first to fish for squid on a commercial scale, carrying firepots on the bow of their sampans (flat-bottomed fishing boats about 12-15 foot in length) to attract the squid to the surface and scooping them up with nets.

In adjacent communities in Monterey County Chinese would play a major role in agriculture, draining the swamp land of Salinas that was a catalyst for widespread vegetable farming. 1,700 Chinese built the first reservoir on the Peninsula in 1888 at Forest Hill. As noted, Chinese built the railway linking Pacific Grove to Monterey and on to San Francisco. Chinese also dominated the laundry industry, providing services for families and businesses alike.

The village at Point Alones interacted with residents of Pacific Grove and Monterey, some serving as house servants and store clerks. Guests at the Del Monte Hotel, a luxury vacation site that is now part of the Naval Post Graduate School, were brought for tours to the village as well as the Chinese settlement at Pebble Beach where the Jung family sold abalone shells and trinkets. Pacific Grove and Monterey residents visited the village on festival days to view fireworks and participate in games.

After the establishment of the church summer camp in Pacific Grove in the late 1870s and its evolution into a municipality with wooden buildings, the city grew outwards. The Pacific Improvement Company, part of the Southern Pacific Railroad, acquired much the land from David Jacks, including the site of the Chinese village, which paid rent while retaining ownership of their homes. Over time what had been an isolated settlement became a valuable location for luxury residence development. The Pacific Improvement Company took steps to resume the property and proposed to relocate the village to another part of Pacific Grove/Pebble Beach.

As this was unfolding, on May 6, 1906 a fire erupted in the village. The origins of the fire are not clear---it may have been an accident, caused by a kerosene lamp being knocked over, or it may have been a deliberate attempt to force the Chinese to depart. In any case, the wooden houses were quickly engulfed in flames. As the Chinese frantically tried to halt the fire and rescue their possessions by carrying them to a safe place, Pacific Grove residents looted some of the village shops and took items from the pile of possessions. Local newspapers decried this behavior in their editions the next day.

Despite efforts to re-establish the village, the Chinese were evicted, some moving to a smaller site at McAbee Beach on what is Cannery Row today. Quickly, memory of the village disappeared from the public mind, the Chinese for generations refusing to mention it to their descendants because of the trauma of the event and fear of reprisal if they attempted to obtain compensation. Pacific Grove residents had no interest in remembering the disgraceful behavior that some residents engaged in.

It was only 80 years later that an academic study which chronicled the history of Chinese in California, *Chinese Gold* by Sandy Lydon, shed light on this episode of Pacific Grove history. It was left to a fifth-generation descendant of the village, Gerry Low-Sabado, to spark a wider discussion of this history. She noted a photograph at Point Lobos, site of the first Chinese settlement, which resembled her grandmother. When she queried her mother about the photo, she was told to leave it alone. She persisted, unraveled more of the history, and in 2010 organized the first Walk of Remembrance to honor the memory of the Point Alones villagers. The walk, now in its 14<sup>th</sup> year, commences at the Pacific Grove Museum of Natural History, proceeds out to the shoreline Recreation Trail and proceeds for a mile to the Hopkins Marine Station.

Much of the history has been a puzzle, slowly merging through the efforts of Sandy Lydon, Gerry Low-Sabado and her family, along with a wide range of individuals and groups like the Coalition for Asian Justice. These participants seek to introduce the

history of the village, disseminate information about the contributions that Chinese have made to the local community over the decades and promote an understanding of Chinese culture.

This has led to a greater appreciation of the unknown history of Pacific Grove, the contributions of the Chinese to the Monterey Peninsula and promotes more meaningful exchanges between the entire community.