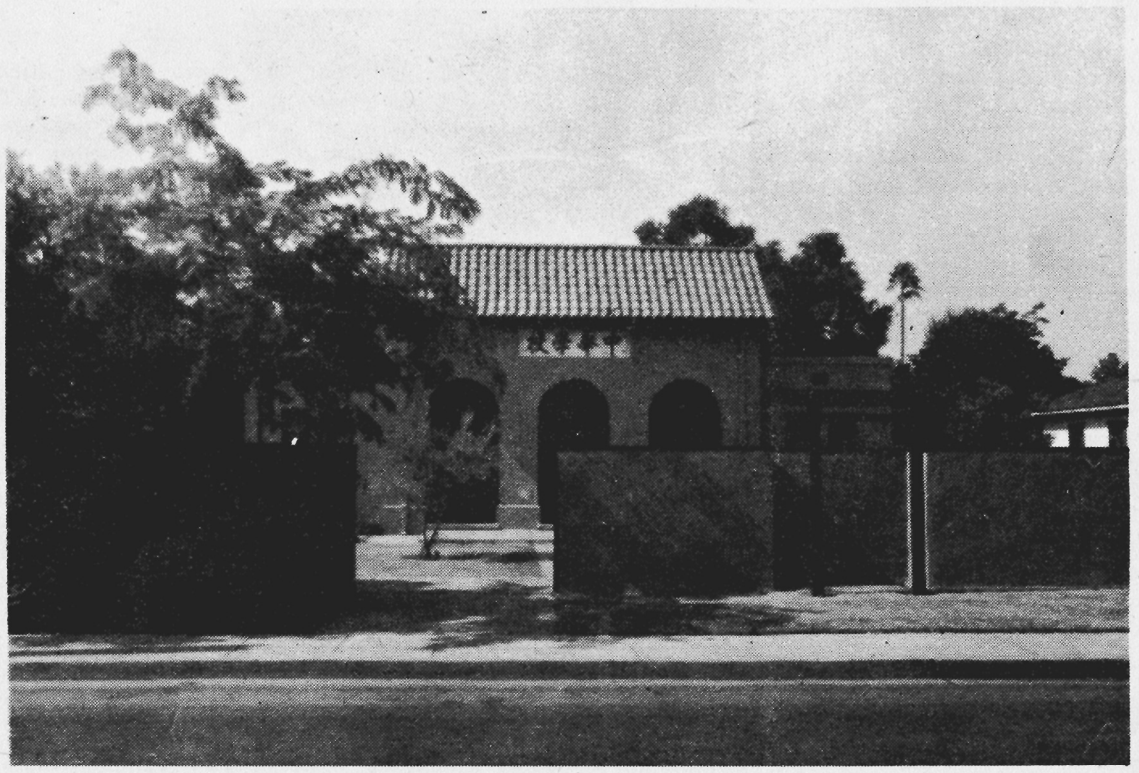
THE RISE AND DECLINE OF CHINA ALLEY, HANFORD

By H. M. LAI

Hanford's China Alley, with its vacant stores and rundown frame buildings, is little frequented nowadays except by a few curiosity seekers. The entire street seems resigned to waiting for the inevitable razing in the name of progress and redevelopment. Yet once upon a time this was a thriving center for the Chinese in central California. Not as big as Chinese communities in the valley towns of Sacramento, Stockton, or Fresno perhaps; but, nevertheless, Hanford's Chinatown was an important community with its associations, temples, and even a Chinese school.

The story of the Chinese in central California did not start with the large-scale Chinese immigration to California of the 1850s, since it was off the beaten track as far as gold mining was concerned. By the end of that decade, Hanford had not yet even come into existence, and census takers counted only 13 Chinese in the entire 6400 square miles of Tulare County (Kings County, where Hanford is located, was then still part of Tulare).



The Hanford Chinese School, now being used as a community recreation center.

YOUNG BEW

Young Bew, who died in Hanford in 1917, is said to have been the first Chinese in the present Kings County. We do not know what brought the young Chinese to this part of the valley, then with few inhabitants and fewer towns. Perhaps he foresaw better economic opportunities. However, one thing is certain: for more than a decade after his arrival, Young Bew had few of his countrymen for company. Even by 1870, the total Chinese population in Tulare County had reached only 99.

It remained for the coming of the Southern Pacific Railroad to open the region to a flood of new settlers. By 1877, a line between Goshen and Huron via Hanford had been opened. Learning from the Central Pacific's profitable use of Chinese laborers on railroad construction, the SP used Chinese labor liberally. Upon termination of their employment, many of these workers naturally settled in the towns, including Hanford, which mushroomed along the route.

COUNTY SEAT

The next decades saw a steady growth in population and rapid development of the region's agricultural wealth. The result was that by 1893, Kings County was carved from the western portion of Tulare County, and Hanford became its county seat.

The Chinese contributed a major share toward the development of this region. It was they who furnished much of the labor in the local farmer's vineyards, cotton fields, and orchards. They constituted the bulk of the temporary and seasonal labor force.

One peculiarity in the pattern of Chinese settlement of this area in central California was the predominance of people from the Sam Yup region in the vicinity of the city of Canton. This pattern was carried even further in that Hanford and nearby Armona included great numbers from Punyu (番禺), while Visalia, county seat of neighboring Tulare County, attracted more from Namhoi (南海).

CHINATOWN

In a pattern similar to that in many other communities, a business and social center was soon established by the Chinese in the Hanford area. A small Chinatown began to take shape. However, this embryonic community was destroyed by fire during the 1880s, and the Chinese had to start all over again at the present site of China Alley. Young Bew is said to have been the leader in erecting the first building there. China Alley was destined to be the center of Hanford's Chinese community for the next few decades.

The total Chinese population of the county, as enumerated by various censuses, never exceeded a thousand, even at its peak in 1890. However, since many Chinese were seasonal or transient laborers, there were several times this number in Kings County during the busy agricultural season. During such periods, Hanford's Chinatown was indeed a bustling place.

Chinese institutions soon appeared in the thriving community. There was a lodge of the Triads (致公堂). Punyu people established a branch of the Chiu Yee Tong (昭義堂) for mutual protection. The dominant Sam Yup merchants played a prominent role in forming the Sam Yup Kung-so (三邑公所), which also housed a temple dedicated to the God of War, Kuan-ti (關帝). This edifice came to be the symbol of the Hanford Chinatown establishment.

Hanford's Chinese community became well-known for its herb doctors. One of them, L. T. Sue (蘇樂亭), became one of the wealthiest Chinese in the valley through selling his curative brews to Westerners. According to contemporary accounts, he had so many patients that in 1908 he set a limit of 100 per day. So respected was the name Sue that later Chinese herb doctors in Hanford felt obligated always to include the name Sue in their establishments' names!

CHINESE EXCLUSION

By the early 20th century, the Chinese population in Kings County had begun to decline. The Chinese Exclusion acts became a barrier for the entry of new younger immigrants. Many Chinese sojourners returned to their native villages. Younger Japanese, Filipino, and then Mexican workers began to supplant Chinese in the fields, orchards and vineyards.

For two decades, Hanford's permanent Chinese population managed to remain relatively static at around 500. A new generation was growing up. Being a small Chinese enclave, it was difficult to maintain "Chineseness." The church and public schools began to play major roles in "Americanization" of the young people. Alarmed elders sought to stem this tendency. Under the leadership of Y. T. Sue (蘇少枏), another prominent herb doctor, funds were solicited from Chinese all over the West, and a New Chinese school was opened in 1923.

However, the Chinese population continued to decline as many left for the large cities or returned to China. By the late 1940s Chinatown was a dying community, as more descendants of the early settlers became assimilated into the life of the large community.

Today the life of the Chinese in the Hanford area no longer revolves around China Alley. The Chinese school, which finally closed its doors in the late 1950s, has been donated to the city of Hanford for use as a community recreation center, with the Chinese community reserving the right to open it as a school again if the need should arise.

ACTION NEEDED

At present, a group of local people, spearheaded by third-generation Hanfordite Richard Wing (江憲泉), is seeking public support for preservation of the Kuan-ti temple housed in the Sam Yup Kung-so. Already the building has been placed on the National Register of Historical Sites, and action on local and state levels is being pushed. This building, one of the oldest buildings still standing in China Alley, was established in 1891. The temple is even older, with the altar being dedicated two years previously, in 1889.

However, time is rapidly running out.

The Chinatown in neighboring Visalia was razed a few years ago, to create room for a parking lot! The Chinatown in Fresno, a few miles north, is now practically all torn down for redevelopment. In Hanford itself, many of the older vacant buildings on China Alley have been demolished in the name of removing public hazards. The remaining structures are at the mercy of vandals and burglars, since there are no funds available to provide protection. There have been many instances of pranksters breaking into the empty buildings. Just two months ago, all the Chinese signboards on the old storefronts were stolen.

Thus, urgent action is needed to preserve this part of the Chinese-American heritage, to leave it for posterity as a reminder of the important role played by the Chinese pioneers in contributing their sweat and toil to make the golden state what it is today.

(A bill to preserve Hanford's Taoist temple, AB 900, was introduced in the California Assembly by Assemblyman Duffy, but it has been shelved. An informational film on Hanford was produced by Curtis Choy, Frank Chin, and Katheryn Fong of the Chinese Media Committee. Reporter Suzanne Joe of KRON-TV detailed the fight to save Hanford on a May 14 segment of Channel 4's Newswatch Special Report. —Ed.)

TAIWAN TO BUILD NEW AIRPORT

TAIPEI — The Taiwan government has announced it will construct a new international airport at Taoyuan, 18 miles south of Taipei, in order to ease congestion at Taipei International Airport. The new airport will be three times the size of the existing one in Taipei. Construction will begin in July and be completed by 1977.

Taiwan has another international airport at Kaohsiung in southern Taiwan.

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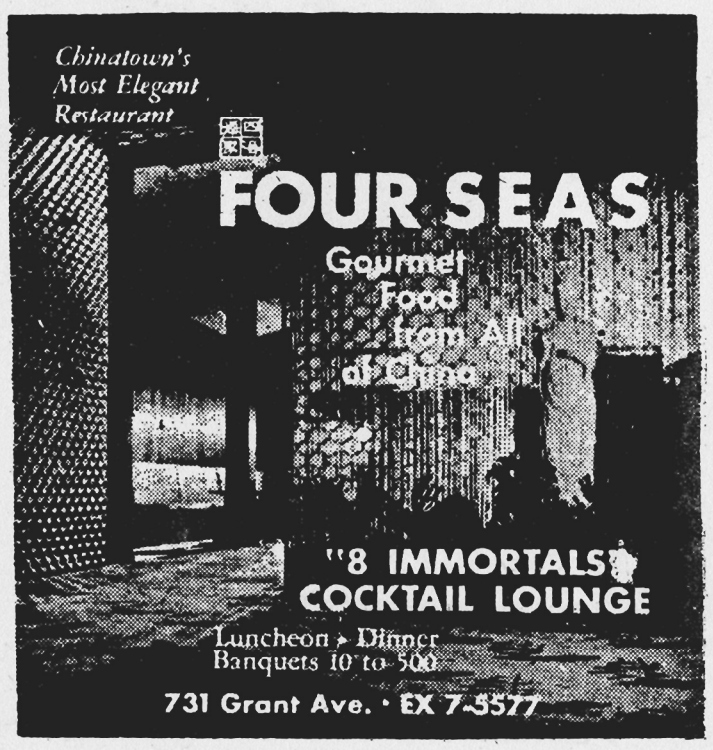
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