

FORGOTTEN LEGACY

'Footprints' traces story of Chinese in Sacramento

By Dixie Reid

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They came to California in Gold Rush times, making their way inland from San Francisco's waterfront to the young city they called Yee Fow, or Second City. We know it as Sacramento.

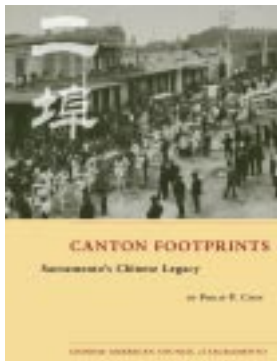
Some modern-day Chinese who have heard the stories about Yee Fow have no idea it was a real place, says Sacramento artist and activist Steve Yee.

"They think Yee Fow is like Camelot, made up, but it was here, in Sacramento. When Chinese think of America, they think of California and of Yee Fow."

The Chinese who came here in the mid-1800s must have had lofty dreams, but here they found disappointment, outright discrimination and sometimes death. Despite their struggles, they built a legacy that long outlived them.

Their story and those of their descendants are at the heart of the new book "Canton Footprints: Sacramento's Chinese Legacy," written by San Francisco historian Philip P. Choy and published by the Chinese American Council of Sacramento (\$30 hardcover, \$20 paperback, 160 pages, 178 historic photographs).

Choy wove into the book the oral histories of 40 men and women who made their mark on Sacramento, including merchant Rose Yee and pioneering



pediatrician Edna Mae Fong.

"Sacramento, like every Chinese community, has a similar story to tell," says Choy, who will talk about the book today during a dinner-lecture at Holiday Villa Restaurant. "But it was the No. 2 city once upon a time (San Francisco was First City), and it's been somewhat neglected. No one had taken upon oneself to write the story, so it's long overdue."

Choy, 81, is a retired architect who was born and raised in San Francisco's Chinatown and, in 1969, taught the first Chinese American history course in the nation at San Francisco State University. In Sacramento, he worked on two important interpretive projects: the California State Railroad Museum's original diorama of Chinese laborers building the transcontinental railroad and the federal courthouse's permanent lobby exhibit "Chinese Pioneers of Sacramento."

He accepted no fee from the Chinese American Council of Sacramento for writing "Canton Footprints."

"I wanted to give it to the community," says Choy. "I wanted to share the information. It's something that I believe in, and that's why I wrote the book."

It wasn't long after James Marshall found those gold flecks in the American River that word reached the Can-

ton region of China of the riches to be found in California.

In the 1850 census, Choy found, only six Chinese were counted among Sacramento's 9,087 residents. In March 1852, approximately 800 to 1,000 Chinese were living in Sacramento, and eight months later, Chinese businesses – gambling rooms, trading and lodging houses, carpenter shops, eateries and a brothel – took up two blocks along I Street, the Chinese commercial district.

Steve Yee is leading an effort to get the Yee Fow Center for History, Culture and Trade built in the old downtown railyards, once the site of Sacramento's Chinatown. (Choy also is involved in that project.)

"Sacramento is at a moment to resurrect Yee Fow," says Yee, "and the stories told in 'Canton Footprints' are a part of that."

"When we think of the Chinese in America, we think of San Francisco, but they were heading to Yee Fow. From here they moved mountains and built the transcontinental railroad and parted the waters and cleared the Sacramento River Delta for agriculture. Yee Fow was the mecca they always came back to."

The idea for "Canton Footprints" came about eight years ago, says Doug Yee, a recently retired dentist and student of Chinese American history

whose great-great grandfather had an herb shop at Seventh and J streets. Yee (no relation to Steve Yee) also is involved with the Yee Fow Center project and is an officer in the Chinese American Council of Sacramento.

"I wanted a book about the history of the Chinese in Sacramento because no one had ever done it before," says Doug Yee. "I've noticed lots of books on San Francisco Chinatown, Stockton, Monterey, even Marysville, so I felt that Sacramento was overlooked. I have a great love for the history and for Sacramento itself."

"This was the western terminus of the transcontinental railroad, and the Chinese built that railroad. We're in the heart of farm land, and a lot of people don't realize Chinese built the (Sacramento River) levees that created the farmland in the Sacramento and northern San Joaquin valleys. And there were a lot of Chinese working in agriculture, tilling the soil and harvesting the crops. Sacramento was distinct from San Francisco in that fact. San Francisco was mostly the merchants and business people."

Doug Yee believes "Canton Footprints" will "pay homage to the ancestors who overcame prejudice and discrimination to lay the groundwork here in Sacramento."

Exactly 150 years after the Gold Rush began, and perhaps the first group of Chinese immigrants arrived, Doug Yee points out, Sacramento had its first Chinese American mayor. Jimmie Yee served out the term of Mayor Joe Serna Jr., who died in 1999 while in office.

"We are trying with 'Canton Footprints' to pay respect to the people who made Sacramento a good place for people of all races to live," says Doug Yee.

"Canton Footprints: Sacramento's Chinese Legacy" can be purchased at the Avid Reader at Tower, 1600 Broadway, and Borders Books & Music, 2339 Fair Oaks Blvd. To order, call (916) 591-8181 or e-mail CACSbookorder@comcast.net.

To learn about the Yee Fow Center for History, Culture and Trade, go to www.yeefowmuseum.org.



Call The Bee's Dixie Reid, (916) 321-1134

'CANTON FOOTPRINTS'

WHAT: Lecture, book-signing and dinner with author Philip P. Choy

WHEN: 4:30-7 p.m. today

WHERE: Holiday Villa Restaurant, 7007 S. Land Park Drive, Sacramento

COST: \$25

INFORMATION: (916) 591-8181