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Focusing on Chinese role

Group plans a museum spotlighting immigrants' influence in capital, state.

By **Lisa Heyamoto**
 BEE STAFF WRITER

In July 1885, a fire broke out in the downtown railyard and tore through what was then Sacramento's thriving Chinatown.

While buildings burned and residents fled, firefighters looked on motionless, prepared to fight the fire only if it moved away from what was considered an undesirable part of town and toward the rest of the city.

Haven't heard the story before? A group of community activists is betting not.

Chinese Americans have played a crucial role in California history, with enough untold stories to fill a museum.

Which is, of course, exactly what a group hopes to do.

The proposed Yee Fow Museum, so-called for the Chinese designation of Sacramento as a "second city" (yee fow), behind San Francisco, would present a chance to share the stories of one of the country's most influential immigrant groups in the state where they carried the most influence -- from the workers who helped build the railroads and levees to the lesser known details of what happened next.

"It's about those nameless, faceless Chinese people who ... were a big part of the Gold Rush story," said local artist Steve Yee, chairman of the Friends of the Yee Fow Museum. "Sacramento was a mecca and is rich in Chinese American history."

Though still very much in the planning stages, organizers envision a world class cultural center where visitors not only can learn about Chinese American history, but a place that can serve as an international destination for

workshops, lectures, art and films celebrating their contributions.

"This is an opportunity for Sacramento (residents) to make a statement that they not only appreciate the Chinese American history in the area, but throughout California," said state Sen. Leland Yee, D-San Francisco, another museum supporter.

"In one's lifetime, you don't often get the chance to dream really, really big. This is an opportunity to do that."

Supporters are working with development company Thomas Enterprises to eventually locate the museum on the downtown railyard property -- a particularly poignant location given the area's past.

The decision to let Chinatown burn in 1885 was part of a systematic effort to purge California cities of their Chinese populations as growing racism toward the immigrants began to be codified in

local and state law, Steve Yee said.

The so-called "driving out" is an ugly chapter, and museum organizers hope publicizing it will help ensure such a thing never happens again.

"History is already made," said supporter Vicki Beaton. "We don't want to repeat it. We want to learn from it."

The Friends of the Yee Fow Museum count some 400 supporters and are working steadily to spread the word and solidify their vision.

Funding, location and the other specifics will be worked out later.

But for now, the sky's the limit.

"This can be as big as we can dream," Steve Yee said.

For more information, visit www.yeefowmuseum.org.

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