



Second City

A plan for a museum to honor Chinese contributions

By Julie Foster

While uncovering his own family history, Land Park resident Steve Yee became convinced that another story—that of Sacramento’s Chinatown—needed to be told. Now Yee, with the help of the Sacramento Chinese Cultural Foundation, has put together a plan for a museum and cultural center within the Railyards project, once the home of Sacramento’s Chinatown.

Yee’s father had immigrated illegally to the United States during the 1940s in violation of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. At that time, Japanese-Americans were being held in internment camps, and there was hostility towards the Chinese. Yee remembers experiencing prejudice during his childhood, along with feelings of confusion over his heritage.

“Growing up I was seen as neither Chinese by the Chinese nor American by Americans,” Yee says.

His father chose to blend in with the mainstream culture.

“We left our culture behind and ate Swanson TV dinners, watched “Father Knows Best” and became San Francisco Giants fans,” Yee explains. “We were trying

to be more American than your average American.”

Years later, after his father’s death, his sister asked him to help her learn more about their background. While researching their father’s heritage, he became aware

occurred during the mid-19th century. That knowledge led him to establish the nonprofit, volunteer group, Friends of the Yee Fow Museum.

The group advocates for a museum and cultural center in the Railyards, commemorating the contributions of Chinese and Pacific Islander pioneers in Sacramento. Both the Railyard design guidelines and the Railyard specific plan include plans for a museum and outdoor garden to tell this neglected story.

The history of Sacramento and the American West is incomplete without the acknowledgment of the contributions made by the Chinese. Chinese workers constructed the Sacramento-San Joaquin levees, played

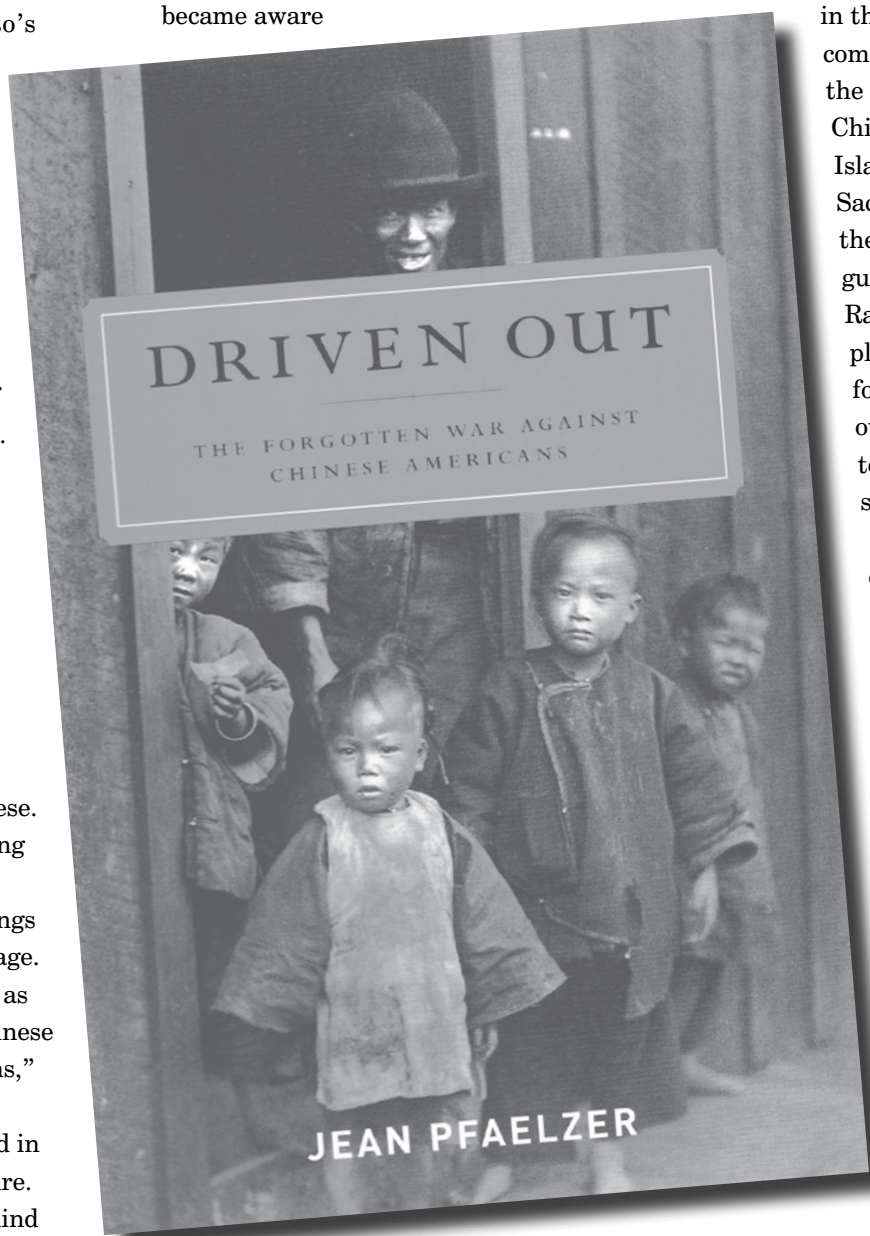
In 1848, Chinese immigrants settled in an area of Sacramento they called Yee Fow, Cantonese for “second city.” The area was also known as Sutter’s Lake and is where the Railyards is located today.

By 1850, Sacramento’s Chinatown was a thriving community. *The Chinese News*, published in 1856, was the first foreign-language newspaper published in Sacramento. The community boasted a social hall, a joss house, a Chinese church and numerous business enterprises. Early immigrants from China were merchants, restaurateurs, laundrymen, peddlers and entrepreneurs. According to an 1852 state census, there were 804 Chinese males and 10 females in Sacramento. The city’s Chinese population peaked in 1880 at 1,781 people.

But during the 1880s, American attitudes toward the Chinese soured. In 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act—the first U.S. immigration law ever to deny rights to a group of people based on race—was passed. States were allowed to rewrite their constitutions to eliminate Chinese populations. Chinese were barred from entering the country, and those already here were barred from citizenship.

What happened next is one of the saddest chapters of American history. Now known as the Driving Out, the process involved brutal treatment of Chinese in towns and cities across the West, including Sacramento. Communities were burned, and people were driven from their communities or executed. By 1909, the Chinese

played a major role in the Gold Rush and laid the foundation for agriculture in California. Ninety percent of the workers on the Central Pacific Railroad were Chinese.



another hidden history: the story of the Chinese immigrants to the West and the systemic ethnic cleansing, known as the Driving Out, that

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had been pushed out of Yee Fow, and Sutter Lake was filled in.

According to Yee, the museum and cultural center his group proposes would provide a place for people to commemorate their history and contributions made by Chinese immigrants. But it will serve another purpose as well.

“This will be another venue to foster the growing relationship between the United States and China,” Yee says.

Yee sees the center as a gateway to Asia, helping those who want to do business in the East to gain a greater understanding of Chinese culture and history.

For more information, visit yeefowmuseum.org or e-mail friends@yeefowmuseum.org.

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On January 13, the Sacramento Chinese Cultural Foundation will present a lecture and book signing by Jean Phaelzer, author of “Driven Out: The Forgotten War Against Chinese Americans” (Random House).

The event, which includes dinner, will take place at Holiday Villa restaurant, 7007 South Land Park Drive. The lecture starts at 4:30 p.m. Dinner follows at 6 p.m.

Tickets are \$10 for members of the Sacramento Chinese Cultural Foundation, \$15 for nonmembers. For more information, call 393-3250. ●