



Courtesy of the California History Room, California State Library
Image shows an area along I Street in Sacramento known as "Chinadom," circa 1854.

Digging up the past



Sacramento Archives & Museum Collection Center/Dleanor McClatchy Collection
An 1870 map of Sacramento shows China Slough and some of the railroad shops at upper left. The first street to the right of China Slough is I Street, with Chinatown located along Second, Third and Fourth streets.

History of the railyard tied to Chinese contribution

By Steve Yee

SPECIAL TO THE BEE

As development begins at the downtown railyard and Sacramento opens what one city official calls a "new chapter in our history," city leaders and developers should be sensitive to the historical ties the Chinese community has with the area.

Much has been written about the 240-acre railyard: In its heyday it was the largest industrial center west of the Mississippi, a railcar production center that dumped chemicals and toxic metals into the ground, later

creating a Superfund site. Rumors abound that locomotives there were buried whole.

Little has been mentioned about the Chinese community, which had a stake in the area before the railyard dominated the Sacramento landscape. The Chinese community provided workers who built the Transcontinental Railroad over the Sierra Nevada to link the United States.

In the early 1860s, thousands of Chinese workers labored to construct the western half of the Transcontinental Railroad out of Sacramento heading east toward the imposing Sierra

Nevada mountain range. Some of the workers, known as "coolies," were imported; others came from California's gold fields and Sacramento, where Chinese immigrants had developed a thriving community known as "Chinadom" along I Street near what is today the railyard.

Before the Central Pacific Railroad hired Chinese workers in 1865, the western half of the Transcontinental Railroad showed little progress. By 1868, when tracks had been laid across the Sierra and into Reno, Charles Crocker, one of the "Big

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A view of Sacramento's railroad center from across China Slough in a photograph from 1878.

Sacramento Archives & Museum Collection Center/Bessie U. Letch Collection

Railyard: Chinese work deserves recognition

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Four" who formed the railroad company, had employed "12,000 Chinese working on a forty-mile stretch of mountain grades," according to the 1939 "Sacramento Guide Book." Chinese workers composed about 90 percent of the work force as the railroad pushed on across Nevada and into Utah.

Even though the contribution by Chinese laborers was crucial to the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad, officials did not invite any Chinese to the ceremony when workers from the west met those from the east on May 10, 1869. When photographs captured the ceremony in which the golden spike was driven at Promontory Point, Utah, they showed not a single Chinese face.

Hundreds of Chinese workers lost their lives in accidents during construction of the railroad. Trains carried bodies back to Sacramento for burial, or the bodies were returned to China. Some may have been buried in a cemetery north of Sacramento's Chinatown, on the edge of an area called China Slough. No memorial was created to honor their sacrifice. A display at The California State Railroad Museum in Sacramento acknowledges the Chinese contribution to the successful completion of the railroad, but the workers remain nameless.

After the final railroad spike was driven in Utah, many Chinese workers returned to Sacramento's Chinatown, a community born out of the Gold Rush. From the late 1840s to 1852, about 15,000 Chinese had immigrated to California, known in China as "Gold Mountain." By 1860, the Chinese population in the United States had grown to about 35,000, most of them living in California. In Sacramento, the Chinese settled near Sutter Lake - later renamed China Slough - the least desired part of town, considered by others as a health hazard and wasteland.

However, the Chinese created a vibrant area of brightly colored, two-story



A view across China Slough toward the city of Sacramento in the 1860s to 1870s.

Library of Congress

buildings that housed shops, restaurants and social halls along I Street, from Second Street to Fourth. Theatergoers would follow exotic sounds of Chinese music coming from social halls such as the Canton Chinese Theater. Sacramentans would make regular visits to enjoy the puppet shows. Later, the shows included performances by theater troupes and their orchestras. On May 23, 1855, Leong Ah Gue, manager and interpreter of a theater troupe at the Sacramento Theater, scheduled two sold-out performances of Chinese opera to exuberant all-white audiences.

After the success in building the Transcontinental Railroad using Chinese labor, industrialists recruited more Chinese workers to build more railroads throughout the West. And more Chinese came to the United States looking for

jobs. Soon, an anti-Chinese sentiment emerged as the Chinese competed with white workers. In 1882, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, which prohibited nearly all Chinese laborers from entering the United States and made Chinese immigrants ineligible for citizenship. After the law's passage, incidents of violence against the Chinese were recorded in the West. The removal of Chinese from some cities and towns became known as "The Driving Out." By the early 1900s many of the Chinese were forced out of Sacramento. The 1911 Encyclopedia Britannica says only 964 Chinese lived in the state capital in 1900. In 1943, Congress repealed the law. Today, more than 35,000 Chinese live in Sacramento County.

Today, there are plans for shops, restaurants and entertainment areas on

ground that filled in the China Slough. As the railyard is developed, city leaders should recognize the history of the Chinese community and what may lie beneath the ground.

"In 1935, I was a young boy with my father when I stumbled onto a tombstone. The caretaker told me of a Chinese cemetery on the edge of China Slough," said Gus Kanelos, a life-long Sacramentan who lobbies for the preservation of veterans cemeteries and has long had an interest in Sacramento's history.

If there is a cemetery at China Slough where early Chinese residents of Sacramento are buried, city leaders and Thomas Enterprises should respect Sacramento's Chinese community by keeping them informed of what is found as bulldozers begin clearing the railyard. The involvement of archaeologists in the construction of the federal courthouse and Regional Transit's light rail line is a model of development respectful to Sacramento's sensitive cultural issues.

Sam Ong, president of the Sacramento Ong Ko Met Family Association, said, "Even in death, we are supposed to be taking care of our elders. We have a sacred trust to ensure the respect and protection of our ancestors and their belongings."

As a new downtown district emerges from the old railyard, the history of Chinese residents in the area should not be neglected. The Chinese community deserves recognition and a role in the revitalization. To ignore today's Chinatown Mall, sandwiched between the railyard and downtown, would be shortsighted. The city should consider a Sacramento Chinese museum and education center with links to Chinatown Mall in its plans to develop the railyard.

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Vicki Beaton, a Sacramento reporter with the Chinese newspaper *World Journal*, contributed to this article.