



Friends of the Yee Fow Museum at the I Street Amtrak station, location of the original Chinese settlement. From left: Jee Choy, Steve Yee, Kim Choy, Wai Moy, Allison Branscombe, Vicki Beaton, and Carlota Gutierrez.

SN&R PHOTO BY DON BUTTON

Sacramento's Chinatown

Can the rail yards find room for a museum that commemorates the Chinese workers who lived and died there?

Local artist Steve Yee paints a gruesome and depressing picture when explaining what happened to the Chinese who once lived on the site of Sacramento's rail yards.
by
Chrisanne Beckner

“There's various forms of driving out. One form was, instead of mass murder, to just burn the place at night. The Chinatown in Sacramento was burned over and over again. ... The Sacramento fire department oversaw a burning. Their job was just to make sure to protect the city, but to let it burn. The Chinese running out of the buildings on fire were not allowed to go to the hospital.”

That Chinatown of the late 19th century didn't much resemble Sacramento's current Chinatown, with its embellished buildings on the north side of J Street between 3rd and 5th streets. Instead, it was a collection of shanties that squatted along the banks of what used to be Sutter's Lake, before Central Pacific Railroad Company filled in the polluted slough. There, men on their way to the gold fields set up a small city of their own, complete with laundries, markets, gambling and a joss house. Now, the Amtrak station sits atop the former lake and, Yee contends, the ruins of Sacramento's earliest Chinese settlement.

To commemorate those who lived and died there, Yee proposes that the local Chinese-American community, the city and Thomas Enterprises partner on a new museum that both commemorates Chinese labor and also exposes the history of anti-Chinese sentiment in California.

“Chinatowns were established for protection. If a Chinese person stepped outside a Chinatown, most likely they would be murdered,” said

Yee. “So Chinatowns were cities within a city. And there was a Chinatown at the rail yard. It was called Yee Fow, Second City.”

He proposes that the Yee Fow museum sit amongst the performing-arts center, retail shops and restaurants that Thomas Enterprises envisions at the old-shop buildings, a part of the fabric of a new marketplace. Yee also proposes a pedestrian overpass to Sacramento's current Chinatown.

Yee didn't grow up with stories of Sacramento's Chinese history. His father assimilated out of fear, and the painter, who is also a program analyst with the California Department of Education, now thinks of himself as inhabiting the hyphen between “Chinese” and “American.” He discovered his history of Sacramento's lost Chinatown while pursuing a more personal mystery. “My sister said to me, ‘Can you help me find out who our dad was?’”

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Yee's father was a “paper son,” a man who created his parentage out of thin air in order to come to the United States with imaginary family ties.

After the United States passed the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882,

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The Senate select committee on Asian Pacific Islander Affairs will host an informational hearing on the history of Chinese-Americans in Sacramento on June 28 at 10:30 a.m. at the state Capitol.

Speakers from the California State Library, the Sacramento Archives, the API Chamber of Commerce, the Chinese Cultural Center of Locke, Sacramento County Supervisor Jimmy Yee's office, Mayor Heather Fargo's office and others will discuss rail yards development on the site of China Slough, Sacramento's first Chinese settlement.

For more information and copies of Steve Yee's reports on the history of Sacramento's Chinatown, visit www.yeefowmuseum.org.

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people like Yee's dad had little choice. They claimed to have family in the United States, and then claimed that the records of those ties had been destroyed by fire after the San Francisco earthquake of 1906. When Yee's father arrived in the 1940s, he arrived with a new identity, the son of an unknown father, with a paper that made it so. Not even his children ever heard his real name.

Joe Yee's true identity is still unknown, says Yee, who now uses what history he could find to support the idea of a museum.

"Our forefathers who came to Sacramento in 1848 built a legacy comparable to none. They built the Central Pacific Railroad, they constructed the vital Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta levees, they played a major role in California's Gold Rush, and they laid the foundation to make California's agriculture world class," Yee told members of the Chinese-American community in May. Yee also wants to document the civil-rights victories that led to the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act in the 1940s.

Thomas Enterprises' Richard Rich, development director for Sacramento, agrees that Chinese-American history is "under represented" in Sacramento's built environment. Thomas Enterprises originally envisioned a memorial, but that idea has been eclipsed by the Yee Fow museum, which Rich said could pair well with the expanded railroad museum planned for the shops buildings.

Thomas Enterprises could provide a shell for the museum, said Rich, but building out the exhibit space could cost more than \$400 a square foot. Those costs may be shouldered by what he called a "mosaic" of funders, including the state of California.

California's legacy of racism against the Chinese is poorly understood, but that may be changing. Yee points to a recently released book by author Jean Pfaelzer, entitled *Driven Out: The Forgotten War Against Chinese Americans*, and its accounts of everything from the violent razing of Chinatowns to legal boycotts and deportation policies.

Pfaelzer's research stretches across California, but includes evidence that Sacramento contributed to the "driving out." For instance, the trustees of Sacramento made it a misdemeanor for any Chinese person to reside in the city after March 1, 1886.

But there are tremendous challenges to building a museum that tells this story: securing funding, amassing a collection and working through the politics of the largest urban-redevelopment project in the region.

Yee laughed, spread his hands and said sincerely, "I'm nobody. I'm a concerned citizen." He's neither a historian nor a politician nor a longtime leader of Sacramento's Chinese community. He's gotten used to hearing, "Who is this guy?" But he has managed to capture the imagination of local Chinese residents.

Joyce Eng is president of the Chinese American Council of Sacramento. She said that the organization, started by the influential Fat family, is very interested in historic preservation, and in Yee's proposal. "When they were excavating that area, they found a lot of Chinese artifacts," said Eng. "We've been talking to the mayor's office and city people. They're also in favor of it."

Yee is also rallying support amongst California legislators. At press time, the 14-member Senate Select Committee on Asian Pacific Islander Affairs was preparing to hold a June 28 hearing on California's Chinese history at the Capitol.

However, historians, and even Yee himself, realize that few artifacts exist from Yee Fow. The early tents were lost to fire and the more permanent brick buildings were lost to urban renewal. Artifacts also disappeared.

James Henley of the Sacramento Archives Museum and Collection Center said, "We have some doubt that we have anything like the quantity to fill a museum." But Henley added that there are other possible forms of recognition, including a cultural center. The early Chinese settlers created a vibrant residential and business community along the lake, said Henley, but they were one of many ethnic groups that worked and lived there. The rail shops were also full of German, Italian and Eastern European workers. "It's probably not conceivable to build a museum for each ethnic group."

As plans for the rail yards have evolved, museum proposals have come from various corners including bids to commemorate cars, science, labor, even Coca-Cola. "Some level of realism is necessary," Henley said. "How many can we support?"

Yee recognizes the challenges, but he believes that a museum that commemorates the Chinese-American experience would illuminate the immigration experience for all. In his May presentation to local Chinese leaders, Yee said that Americans have a tradition of attacking new arrivals when the economy stalls. "When we get nervous, we reach for this dark side. ... People say our Latin brothers don't want to assimilate; they have strange habits. They just want to send their money home and go back. This is exactly what we said about the Chinese when they were the farm-workers of America." □