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California Agriculture’s Chinese Roots

By Carmen Lee

In *Stuff & Starved: The Hidden Battle for the World Food System*, Raj Patel noted the role of immigration in California’s agricultural history – beginning with indigenous people, followed by Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos, Mexicans, Punjabis and Oaxacan. Each group brought their own foods, skills, seeds and expertise – thus contributing to California’s agricultural prosperity (our state produces one third of our nation’s food), while enduring racism and exclusion. (See preceding article for more information on book and web site.)

With the growing interest in local food and where it comes from, I joined the California Historical Society’s tour, *Following the Golden River: Early Chinese Pioneers of California’s Heartland*. This weekend journey traced the footsteps of the early Chinese who arrived in San Francisco on their way to work in the Sierra Nevada gold mines, railroad, and levees of the Central Valley from Marysville to Stockton.

Gold Rush

Farmers from China’s Pearl River Delta region began immigrating to California during the Gold Rush of 1849. These immigrants came to seek a better life in Gum Shan (Gold Mountain) – fleeing invasions by foreign powers, civil unrest, inflation, famines resulting from overpopulation and natural disasters (earthquakes, fires, periodic floods and droughts).

California welcomed the Chinese in 1850 with enactment of the Foreign Miners Tax, which was mainly collected

from the Chinese in an attempt to drive them from the mines and contributed up to half of California’s revenue.

While some Chinese miners opened laundries and restaurants (creating Hangtown Fry, a variation of the Cantonese egg foo young) to provide a more steady living, others cultivated patches of vegetables, sweet potatoes and fruits. By the early 1860s, Chinese were growing vegetables in virtually every mining camp where they were found and along major transportation routes. Miners reached the mining camps by traveling along the Sacramento and San Joaquin Rivers.

Transcontinental Railroad

From 1865 to 1869, over 10,000 Chinese were involved in the construction of the first transcontinental railroad, which facilitated the transport of California produce. The railroad fed white workers beef, beans, potatoes, bread and drinking water from contaminated streams. In contrast, the Chinese ate a more balanced diet of rice, dried fish, vegetables, fruits and tea – which they transported by their own supply network – and thereby avoided some dietary diseases common to other workers.

Agriculture

At the time of the Gold Rush, California’s food source came primarily from cattle-raising. The Central Pacific Railroad Company’s use of Chinese labor inspired other entrepreneurs to hire Chinese in other large construction projects, such as swampland reclamation and levee building that helped convert the Sacramento River Delta into some of the richest farmland in the world. Brian Tom, founder of the Chinese American Museum of Northern California in Marysville, noted that when the Chinese first immigrated

to California in the mid-19th century, China had developed the most advanced agricultural technology in irrigation, crop rotation and fertilization.

Ecology Action's John Jeavons has acknowledged the "highly effective, resource-conserving, and sustainable 4,000-year-old Chinese Biointensive way of farming." Chinese from the Pearl River Delta had experience in controlling waters and developing fertile farmland in inaccessible river valleys.

Beginning in the 1860s, Chinese began reclamation of land in Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, a marshy swamp that was subject to heavy flooding. This work involved building a series of levees to control the flooding. They hired for as little as 90 cents a day, using hand shovels and wheelbarrows.

By 1880, they reclaimed 88,000 acres from Delta marshlands for agricultural production – notably developing "Asparagus Capital of the World" and the major source of Bartlett pears. Canneries arose near the fruit orchards and farms to handle the produce as soon as it was harvested.

"Driving Out"

The railroad brought cheap manufactured goods and unemployed European immigrants from the East Coast, triggering an economic depression in the West and the Chinese were made scapegoats. During the "Driving Out" period, white mobs burned and plundered Chinese communities throughout the West. Most Chinese farm workers, who made up 75% of California's agricultural workers in 1890, were expelled. The vacant agricultural jobs, which later proved to be unattractive to unemployed whites, were filled then by Japanese workers.

Locke

The Sacramento Delta was one of the few places where Chinese escaped violence. In *Bitter Melon: Inside America's Last Rural Chinese Town*, James Motlow observed, "Undoubtedly, the enormous fortunes made by Delta landowners, canners and shippers helped soothe the intolerance of the Chinese: until World War II,

Chinese rarely made more than a dollar a day as laborers and domestic help. Also, the Chinese stayed as much to themselves as possible . . ."

In 1915, a group of Chinese built their own town on Delta land leased from George Locke. (Under California's 1913 Alien Land Act, Chinese were not allowed to own land – until this law was declared unconstitutional in 1952.

Sacramento County, which governs the 10 acres on which Locke was built, subdivided the land to enable its residents to purchase land for the first time in 2004.) For almost 5 decades, Locke was inhabited solely by Chinese. As the children of Locke's first families left for higher education and professional careers, whites followed by a few Filipino and Mexican families moved in.

Designated a National Historic Landmark in 1990, Locke today has 10 remaining Chinese residents from its peak of 600, a community garden and memorial in honor of the "industrious Chinese pioneers of California whose strength and sacrifice helped build the transcontinental railroad, construct the levees of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, and develop agriculture in the Central Valley."

This reflection on the experiences of Chinese pioneers and other immigrants in bringing produce from "farm to table" gives much food for thought and appreciation. For more information or discussion, contact Carmen Lee carmen_cebs@yahoo.com

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