



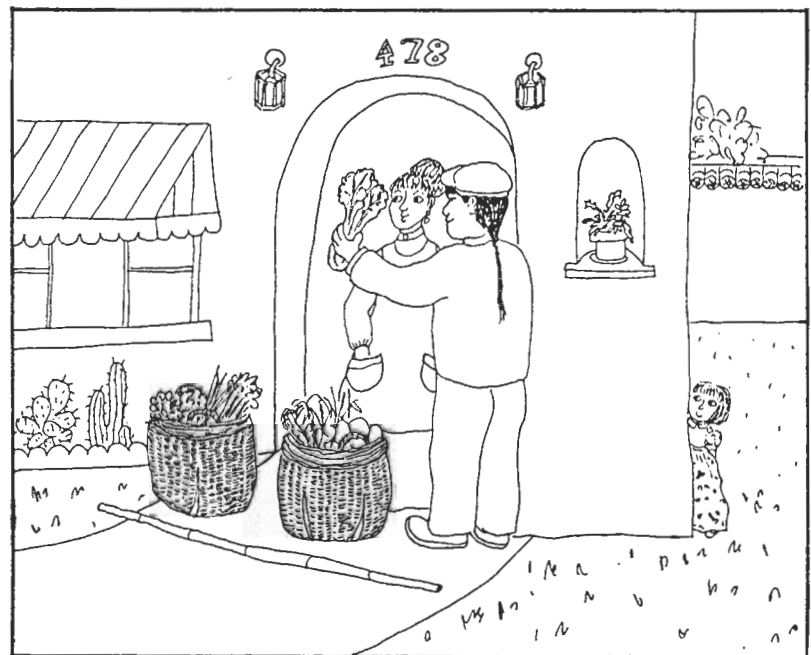
SAVE RIVERSIDE'S CHINATOWN

By Julie Wong

Illustrated By Linda Wong

Someone says "Chinatown". You ask "Where? Los Angeles? San Francisco? New York? Monterey Park?" What about Riverside, California? Currently it is attracting attention here and in Chinese communities abroad for the distinction of having the only Chinatown site left where artifacts of the early Chinese in Southern California may be found. The buildings are gone now, but it was once a thriving Chinese community. The residents, mostly men, played a major role in the citrus industry. They also worked as house servants, operated laundries, and grew and sold vegetables.

Anti-Chinese sentiment pressured the Chinese to move the Chinatown away from the original downtown area location. At the turn of the century, the permanent population peaked at about 200. During harvests tent-dwellers brought it up to 2,000.



Vegetable Peddler
at the turn of the
century.

In the 1920's, laws restricting immigration and prohibiting marriage to white women and a general movement to the big cities for better job opportunities were major factors in the declining population. The last original resident died in 1938.

When it was learned last year that the county was planning to build a parking lot over part of the site, a group of concerned individuals formed the Ad Hoc Citizen's Committee to Save Riverside's Chinatown. Its goal was to promote the excavation and study of Chinatown and bring recognition to the contributions made by the early Riverside Chinese. The committee and the Cultural Heritage Board have led a successful drive towards achieving these goals. The city and county have allocated \$40,000 and \$20,000 has been contributed by private sources. The Great Basin Foundation, an organization of archaeologists and anthropologists, are lending their resources to the study.

The enthusiasm for the project continues to grow. Congressman George Brown said in a letter of support that, "That it would be a shame if we in Riverside would miss such a golden opportunity to enhance our understanding of our past. The contributions of the Chinese have long been ignored or misunderstood." Rarely has the community seen such a positive rally of unanimous support for a cause.

Last November, in the first phase of the dig, the committee began salvaging as much as possible from the designated one-acre parking lot area of the site. It was discovered that the area was mainly used as a vegetable garden and a wealth of material was uncovered in what turned out to be a village garbage dump. Some of the items included pottery shards, animal bones, opium pipes, square-headed nails, herbal bottles, gaming pieces, kitchen tiles, and a pewter horse.



First phase of the
Chinatown excavation.

The second phase and major excavation of the remaining six acres where the main buildings once stood is scheduled to begin February 20th to coincide with the Chinese New Year. Maxine Hong Kingston, noted Chinese-American author, will attend the dedication ceremony as the guest of honor.

From the future studies of the material the archaeologist will discover more about what life was like in Chinatown: what they were making, using, eating, or throwing away. There isn't much of a written record of the early Chinese immigrants, so this archaeological study is of great importance in learning not only about daily life, but also about such things as migration patterns, business practices, and to what degree the Chinese assimilated. The researchers are planning to write a book about Chinatown using the archaeological information as well as eyewitness accounts, newspaper clippings, and other historical data.

A timely exhibit at the Riverside Municipal Museum commemorating the centennial of Riverside's Chinatown and a two-day symposium on Chinese culture and history will coincide with the excavation proceedings. Also in the works is a video-documentary titled, "Orange Groves and Rice Bowls: The Story of Riverside's Pioneer Chinese Community".

My involvement with "Save Riverside's Chinatown" began last August when I was asked to show my slides of Chinatown at a meeting and presentation held at the public library. The slides were taken in 1974, right after George Wong, the last owner-resident of Chinatown had passed away. My slides showed what was hidden behind a dirt embankment below street level. Among the dense brush and bamboo were the last remaining brick buildings of Chinatown. In the outlying fields was an auto graveyard -- old cars, some of them antiques, in various stages of disrepair, oxidation and rust. Soon the cars and property would be auctioned off with the net proceeds of the estate sale going to George's relatives in China. A few years later, the brick buildings were torn down.

George came to the United States at the age of 14 in 1914. He was from the same village as my parents -- Gom-Benn which is about 50 miles from Guangzhou in Southern China. His father was already a vegetable peddler here whom people called "Little Joe". George acquired the Chinatown property at a court sale following the 1941 closure of the last Chinatown place of business and death of the then property owner Wong-Nim. He briefly operated the Bamboo Gardens, a restaurant in a wooden building on the property. He lived in that same building many years before moving into a trailer on the property. At one time he said he would like to see the property developed into a modern shopping complex with a restaurant and import-export business. It was a dream that never materialized.

George was a prominent figure in Chinatown's later history, especially with people who knew him in the 20's, 30's, and 40's. Gauging from the audience reaction and response during the presentation, it was evident that most of the people attending had known George. After the presentation, a number of people came up to me to reminisce about George. One woman was in the same high school class, another person knew him at city college, one man shop-talked about antique cars with him, and more than one person spoke of George brandishing a gun to chase people off his property. A lot of memories were stirred and it was obvious that George had made a lasting impression on most of these people.

You would have thought that George was quite a sociable character, but behind the wide grin, flashing teeth and deep, loud laughs was a loner. He was a colorful eccentric content to be with just his chickens, old cars, and junk collections.

My father's second cousin, Bing S. Wong, recalled knowing about George and what Chinatown was like around 1928 when he briefly lived in Riverside, but not in Chinatown. Although Bing has lived most of his life in San Bernardino, whose Chinatown was perhaps more thriving than Riverside's, (Riverside and San Bernardino Chinatowns were the largest in the Inland Empire area), it was only 10 miles away from Riverside. He visited Chinatown occasionally when only a handful of residents, mostly old men, were still living there. Bing described life then as being hard, lonely, and isolated. Restrictive immigration laws separated the men from their families, creating a life of mostly work, rest, and lottery playing. He said the major concerns were to make enough money to send home to China and eventually to return there.

My memories of George and Chinatown go back to when I was a small child and my father would take me and my older siblings to visit him. My parents owned a restaurant so we would bring bread crumbs, vegetable scraps and rice for his chickens. While George and my father talked, my brothers and sisters and I would play in the fields and explore around the buildings and old cars which were filled with junk and all kinds of odds and ends. He had quite a few chickens and I remember being frightened of the roosters that seemed to be almost as tall as me. They seemed intent on chasing me and pecking at my heels.

Many people in the community became interested and involved in the effort to save Riverside Chinatown because they knew George. It is through George and the various people who knew him that a way has been opened for us to discover, learn and understand more about Chinatown and the early Chinese pioneers in California. Little did he know that he would turn out to be the guardian of the buried history and past of Riverside Chinatown.

If the reader would like to help "Save Riverside's Chinatown" and support the historical research about Chinese in California, please contact Julie Wong, 4161 University Avenue, Riverside, Calif., 92501, or call (714) 684-4079. Any information of relatives and friends that were known to have lived in Riverside Chinatown, letters and photographs sent to Gom-Benn from Riverside Chinatown, or any other information that might be helpful is encouraged and welcome.

Help promote the knowlege and understanding of our culture and heritage!



A visit to George Wong's Chinatown.