



SANTA BARBARA CHINATOWN: THE EARLY YEARS

by ELLA YEE QUAN

Yes, there IS a Chinatown in Santa Barbara. It was built especially for the Chinese in 1926. A total of 24 units span around one whole corner --- about a quarter mile long in total --- half on Santa Barbara Street and half on East Canon Perdido Street. The original buildings still exist today, but with all new tenants. Only three units are occupied by Chinese as this is being written.

In the mid-1800s, Chinese worked the railroads in northern and southern California as well as the Santa Ynez Turnpike Road in San Marcos Pass, and the Southern Pacific Railroad between Saugus and Goleta in the Santa Barbara area. As the railroads neared completion, many Chinese found their way to Santa Barbara, where it was recorded that 10% of the population in the late 1800s, or 700 people, were Chinese. Most of these were single men who worked on the railroads, in private homes as cooks and houseboys, or had vegetable farms and laundries. Some also came as merchants and chose Santa Barbara's mild climate to make their homes.

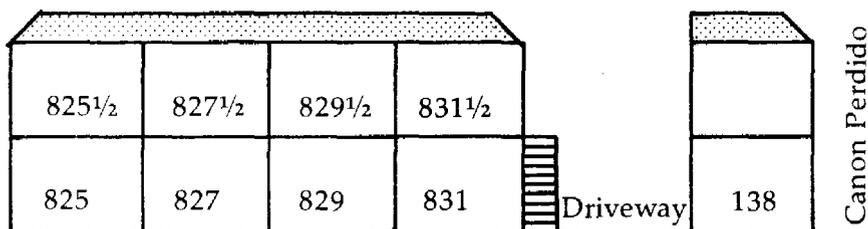
Ah Lim was said to have opened a cook house as early as 1862. His son, Jimmy, later opened and operated Jimmy's Oriental Gardens, which was later moved to East Canon Perdido Street, just west of the present-day Chinatown structures. Jimmy's son, Tommy, and Tommy's wife now operate this restaurant while Tommy's retired mother oversees the business from her home in the rear.

FIRST CHINESE COMMUNITY

Santa Barbara's Chinese community first began on both sides of East Canon Perdido Street from State Street to Anacapa Street. One former resident remembers the two story buildings which had apartments upstairs and businesses, Tong associations, and gambling establishments downstairs. He also remembers the earthquake of 1925 when his family and others had to evacuate their homes and slept in tents on the lawn of the Lobero Theatre for several nights until the aftershocks subsided.

CHINATOWN

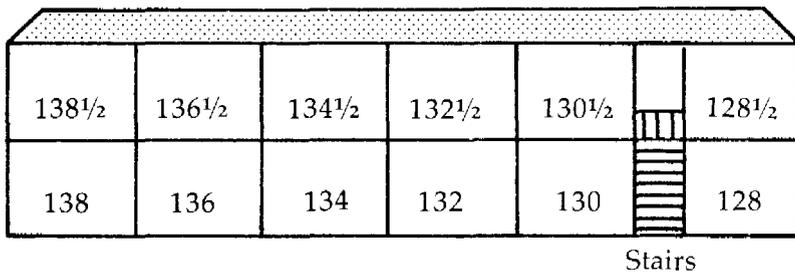
With many of his Chinese friends left homeless after the 1925 earthquake and the Chinese population growing, a builder and contractor, Elmer Whittaker, wanted to build some homes just for his Chinese friends, but he didn't have the finances. The corner of East Canon Perdido and Santa Barbara Streets was chosen as the site for a Chinatown. Three of the more prominent Chinese merchants loaned the money to Whittaker and gave their input as to what was needed in Chinatown. As a result, the new buildings were built with apartments or living quarters upstairs and the downstairs for businesses in front with facilities for lodging in the rear, similar to the buildings they replaced.



SANTA BARBARA STREET

The three men who financed the project were among the first to move their families and businesses into the new buildings. One moved into 825 Santa Barbara Street, but soon returned to China because of family problems and never returned. Mr. N.J. Yee moved into 827 Santa Barbara Street, with his eldest son and family living upstairs, while he and his wife lived downstairs. His other sons later came to join them as they completed their Chinese education in China. Mr. Y.W. Yee moved into 829 Santa Barbara Street. Number 829 was an herb store with living quarters in the rear for himself, his wife, three sons and a daughter (these children were all born at 36 East Canon Perdido Street). The upstairs was for his eldest son's family. Number 831 Santa Barbara Street became a store front for the gambling house in the rear. Bing Kong Tong was upstairs and remained there until after World War II when the furnishings and shrine were moved to the Oxnard Bing Kong Tong. Entrances to the upstairs were either through the stores in front or around the back of the building.

A driveway leading into a spacious back yard broke the continuity of the buildings. The back yard was used for recreation for the young people who lived there as well as for family vegetable gardens, small chicken pens, and pigeon raising. North of the driveway, at a right angle, began the next set of buildings with a set of stairs leading residents to their upstairs apartments. A similar set of stairs was at the west end of the building. The store fronts were on East Canon Perdido Street.



EAST CANON PERDIDO STREET

The first store on the corner, 138 East Canon Perdido Street, was called Hing Yuen Co. before it was rented to a Mr. K.J. Yee who operated a small Western type grocery store while raising his family in the rear. Mr. K.J. Yee was also the Chinatown doctor who made home visits for minor illnesses, by feeling the pulse of his patients and prescribing Chinese herbs.

136 East Canon Perdido Street was a restaurant owned by Mr. Y.W. Yee of 829 Santa Barbara Street. Before the war (WWII), many single men, especially Filipino farm workers, would avail themselves to a large bowl of wonton noodle soup with slices of hard-boiled egg, vegetables, and freshly made barbecue pork for 25¢, or rice and sweet and sour pork for a few cents more. This restaurant was sold around 1942 when Mr. Yee's two sons were drafted. Mr. and Mrs. Gin and their three children, who moved to Santa Barbara from San Francisco, bought the restaurant. With the onset of World War II, most of the men had gone to war, and with the economy as it was, the Gin family had to close the business for lack of customers. Around 1944, after Mr. Gin passed on due to ill health, Mrs. Gin opened Yat Sun Hand Laundry on the same premises with the help of her young children. Eventually, her son became old enough to take over the business until he sold it in recent years to a non-Chinese mother and son. The new owners have kept the name of Yat Sun Laundry and are operating possibly the only hand laundry in town.

134 East Canon Perdido Street was a social gathering place for many Chinese men in the evenings and on weekends. Chinese vegetables and some Chinese dried ingredients for cooking were sold in the front.

132 East Canon Perdido Street housed Gee Kong Tong in the rear. That was where the shrine and some of the items, which were all donated by Elmer Whittaker, and are now on display at the Santa Barbara Historical Museum, originally came from. As some of the merchants brought their wives over from China and started raising families, concern for their children's education in Chinese history, literature, and language was felt. The front of 132 East Canon Perdido Street was used for a Chinese language school. From about 1937 to 1942, there were about 20-30 Chinese youngsters in the small one room school house studying Chinese five days a week after school and on Saturdays. Because the majority of the Chinese families spoke Sze Yup, it was decided that the teacher should teach the children to read in that dialect. (Most Chinese language schools teach in Sam Yup or what is now considered Cantonese, even though both are dialects of Canton.)

130 East Canon Perdido Street was a Chinese herb store. Next to it were some steps leading up to 128^{1/2}, an upstairs apartment unit. Number 128 downstairs was another gambling house. One needs to understand that the majority of the Chinese at that time were single men and they needed recreation during their off working hours and weekends. Frequent police raids somewhat restricted these activities, but bribery accepted by the officers were common and the establishments were kept open most of the time.

The occupants of 138^{1/2} Canon Perdido were the Hop Sing Tong but when they moved next door to 136^{1/2}, a Mexican family moved in for a short time. Some single men lived in 134^{1/2}. Mrs. Gin who operated the small store at 134 East Canon Perdido Street lived with her two sons in 132^{1/2} for about six years. After the war began, they moved and it became a clubhouse for the teenagers. 130^{1/2} was rented by some single men. 128^{1/2} was rented by a Chinese family.

The driveway next to 128 East Canon Perdido Street ended the Chinatown structures on this street. West of the driveway was one of the town's first French bread bakeries, operated by an Italian family. Jimmy's Oriental Gardens later built on that property.

Even though it has been recorded that there were 700 Chinese in Santa Barbara in the late 1920s, it has been estimated that Chinatown itself never housed more than 200 individuals. Many Chinese lived in other areas of Santa Barbara, opening laundries, restaurants, dry goods stores, curio shops, or were farmers or vendors with their own vegetable trucks.

During World War II, most of the Chinese men left to serve in the United States Armed Forces. Some came back after the war, and brought their wives over from China, as the law was finally changed to allow this, especially for the veterans. As the younger American born Chinese graduated from high school or college, each moved out of Santa Barbara due to lack of employment opportunities in the city. Few chose to remain in Chinatown even if they stayed in Santa Barbara. No one who lived in Chinatown in the 1930s is still in the city today. Even the few families who live there now are those who moved there shortly after World War II began.

Today, the Chinese population has grown and is more visible throughout the city as can be attested by the many Chinese restaurants in town. The people are more likely not from Canton, but from Taiwan and other places. Eventually there may not be any Chinese living in the original Chinatown, but Chinatown will always be there as long as the buildings built especially for the Chinese remain intact, around the corner of Santa Barbara and East Canon Perdido Streets.

Ella Y. Quan was born and raised in Santa Barbara's Chinatown, which had been developed with financial assistance from her grandfather, Y.W. Yee. She came to Los Angeles after World War II, and is presently the coordinator for year-round sessions at Castelar School in Los Angeles' Chinatown.



SHORT HISTORY OF CASTELAR SCHOOL

compiled by CASTELAR SCHOOL STAFF

Castelar School was originally named Castelar Street School. In 1965, Hill Street extended to the north from downtown Los Angeles and Castelar Street was changed to North Hill Street. Later, the word "street" was deleted from the school name and it became Castelar School.

Inside of 100 years, Castelar School has undertaken a great transformation from its original site on the southwest corner of College and Castelar Streets to the southeast corner of College and Yale Streets. In 1882, Castelar Street School was a 4-room school with an enrollment of approximately 300-400 students. The staff consisted of 4 teachers, which included the principal, and served grades 1 through 8. The student population was approximately one-third of Spanish surnames and the remaining two-thirds of Anglo surnames.

Today in 1982, Castelar School has 33 classrooms with an enrollment of approximately 1100 students. The staff includes 42 teachers, 1 principal, 1 assistant principal and a supportive staff of 10 people serving Kindergarten through 6th grades. The student population now is about 80% Asians, 19% Hispanics, and 1% others. Five adult English classes in the evening hours round out the educational program at Castelar.

Castelar School is unique and has the distinct features of being the second oldest continuing school in the district, the only school with an attached Children's Center and Public Library, has the largest number of Indochinese refugees of any school in the district, and the first Chinese elementary school principal in the district.

After 100 years of educating students, Castelar continues to grow. With the present facilities having a capacity for housing only 800 students, Castelar began a Year-Round Program in the 1981-82 school year to accommodate the growing student population.

On November 9, 1982, Castelar School held a special midday program to celebrate its 100th year of service to the community. Dr. William Chun-Hoon, principal, directed a program that included song and dance performances by students and presentations from local government officials. March Fong Eu, California's Secretary of State, made a special appearance to congratulate Castelar School on its anniversary.

The Historical Society participated by researching, preparing and hanging a historical photo display consisting of over twenty panels. Most of the material will remain in the Society's collections and can be available to researchers.

CASTELAR SCHOOL'S BATH TUB MAKES TROUBLE

The following article appeared in the Los Angeles Examiner, September 24, 1904:

The proposition to install a bath tub in the new Castelar Street School building is meeting with strong resistance.

Whether it is considered an affront to the cleanly or a reflection on the unwashed is not disclosed.

Health Officer Powers has recommended that a tub have a place in the new building. He says that all of the schools, without exception, should be fitted with bath tubs.

Some people whose children attend the school in question have raised an objection. They do not want the pupils subjected to the weakening effects of warm water.

They also think it will be an embarrassing situation if the teacher detects evidences of soil on an urchin's face and says, "Johnny, off to the bath tub with you."

Some of them exclaim with scorn, "You must think we don't have bath tubs at home."

Miss Ella M. Thornton, the school nurse appointed yesterday by Dr. Powers, will have supervision of the children in a material sense. One of her duties will be to direct those who have gathered dust, mud or oil on the way to the school to the bath tub. The tub is far enough away from the recitation rooms so that the cries issuing therefrom cannot be heard.

The Amelia Street School is equipped with a bath tub and Miss Mary Henderson, the principal, says it has been a great success. The Board of Education will decide the Castelar School controversy.

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