

## **A VIEW OF CHINATOWN IN THE 1870s**

**Mariam Hansen, 2011**

When a visitor approached St. Helena on Main Street in the 1870s and looked to the west at Charter Oak, Chinatown was visible, set back from the road at a distance.

Chinatown consisted of two rows of shabby wooden buildings made of scrap lumber, with a temple at the western end of the village. Each building had a store in front, such as Quong Loong High & Co. or Hong Yuck & Co. Sam Sing Lung kept a store and also managed a labor force, farming out “coolies” as laborers.

### **In the rear rooms gambling on fan-tan was the pastime**

These rooms and the attics overhead provided the sleeping quarters, inhabited by men in blue robes with pigtailed. Around 1879 there were about 200 men living there. By the late 1800s, there were an estimated 600 workers. The Chinese population of Napa County was 5,521 in 1860 and 16,451 in 1900.

### **The railroad tracks to Calistoga were completed in 1868**

The railroad company brought Chinese laborers to town to mine gravel for the roadbed. They constructed a few shacks next to the gravel pits to use as housing for their Chinese workforce. Calistoga, Rutherford and Napa also had Chinese neighborhoods. Wherever there was hard work for low pay, Chinese men fanned out from San Francisco to fill the need. They provided labor to pick grapes and hops, plant vineyards and build wineries. The wine caves at Beringer and Schramsberg were hand dug by the Chinese workforce.

Many locals believed that Chinese workers were driving down wages and taking white men’s jobs. The newspaper described them as “punk-scented, opium-smoking infidels”

Concerns arose about white young men learning to smoke opium. In 1884, Chinese workers lobbied for higher wages. By 1886 an “Anti-coolie League” had formed, marching on Chinatown to demand it be vacated in ten days.

### **The wine industry depended on Chinese labor until the 1890s**

Leading vineyardist posted flyers for a citizens meeting held in February 1886 to urge caution. These agitations are injurious to the community, would have a bad effect on visitors and would prevent new residents from moving here, they said. The valley would be jeopardized by forcing the major labor source out before other vineyard labor could be found.

The meeting concluded that Chinatown needed to be moved. Three businessmen purchased Chinatown and a site outside city limits and, giving residents 30 days to transfer to the new location. They refused, citing long term leases and hired a Napa law firm to represent them. The new landlords were unable to collect rents during the dispute, and the case went to US District Court.

### **Joint celebrations for Chinese New Year**

Locals were invited to Chinatowns all over the Napa Valley to celebrate and see the fireworks. Many homes had Chinese cooks and gardeners, including the Lyman,

Wheeler and the Lewellings. In the 1930 census, some of these homes still had their Chinese employees.

Due to poor construction and carelessness, several fires damaged Chinatown. One occurred in 1884, but the buildings were rebuilt. In 1898 a major fire began when Wong Gin neglected a cooking fire. Eight buildings were destroyed, including four stores and the temple. In 1911, a final fire destroyed what remained of Chinatown.

**Sources:**

- Napa Wine
- St .Helena Star