

## ST. HELENA'S CHINESE HERITAGE

By Mariam Hansen, June 2011

In 1868 the Napa Valley Railroad construction crews reached St. Helena. They needed large amounts of gravel from our gravel quarry to lay down the base for the tracks.

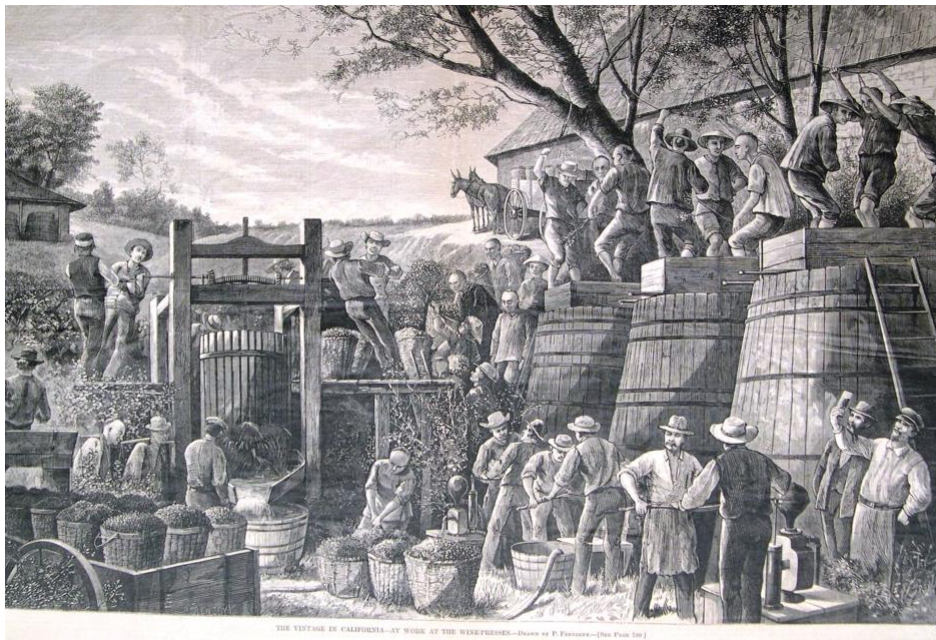
Although a few Chinese were previously living in Napa, the need for a large labor force to move gravel brought the first large group of Chinese immigrants to the upper Napa Valley. They were housed where they worked, next to the gravel pit, now owned by Harold Smith & Sons.

### **In the economic downturn of 1873, wine sales dropped**

Vineyardists wanted to cut costs and have a large labor force available whenever needed. A request to a labor contractor in San Francisco would bring a train carload of men on the next day's train.

In 1872 the *Overland Monthly* wrote "grapes in the northern portion of the state are picked by Chinamen, who will pick an average of 1,500 pounds a day. They board themselves and are paid \$1 a day" (*Overland Monthly, Jan 1872 p41*). During a time of a huge increase in vineyard development here, a large farm labor force was needed to clear land and plant vines.

The contribution of Chinese labor to the wine industry was not publicized in those days. When *Harper's Weekly* published a drawing of the harvest of 1878 showing Chinese stomping grapes with their feet, those in the industry were outraged. Partially because of the clean image, but also because grapes were, in fact, crushed in a press.



**Harper's Weekly "The Vintage in California" by Frenzeny**

It was only when an accident or death was reported, vintners who employed Chinese laborers were named in the newspaper. An example was a Chinese worker who got his finger caught in a grape crusher owned by St. Helena's first mayor Henri Pellet in 1876.

## Chinese also worked in fields, hopyards and mines

They were household servants, cooks, laundrymen, merchants and clerks. They dug the caves at Beringer and Schramsberg. About 100 Chinese worked on the railroad between Napa and St. Helena in 1880. The Sage Canyon Road, now Highway 128, was being graded by 125 Chinese in 1886.

Page No. 16  
 Supervisor's Dist. No. 3  
 Enumeration Dist. No. 76  
 SCHEDULE I.—Inhabitants in St. Helena, in the County of Napa, State of California, enumerated by me on the 11 day of June, 1880.  
 R. A. Sanford

No.	Name	Sex	Age	Occupation
142179	Wah Sing	M	21	Cook
142180	Wah Sing	M	18	Cook
142181	Wah Sing	M	15	Cook
142182	Wah Sing	M	12	Cook
142183	Wah Sing	M	9	Cook
142184	Wah Sing	M	6	Cook
142185	Wah Sing	M	3	Cook
142186	Wah Sing	M	0	Cook
142187	Wah Sing	M	0	Cook
142188	Wah Sing	M	0	Cook
142189	Wah Sing	M	0	Cook
142190	Wah Sing	M	0	Cook
142191	Wah Sing	M	0	Cook
142192	Wah Sing	M	0	Cook
142193	Wah Sing	M	0	Cook
142194	Wah Sing	M	0	Cook
142195	Wah Sing	M	0	Cook
142196	Wah Sing	M	0	Cook
142197	Wah Sing	M	0	Cook
142198	Wah Sing	M	0	Cook
142199	Wah Sing	M	0	Cook
142200	Wah Sing	M	0	Cook

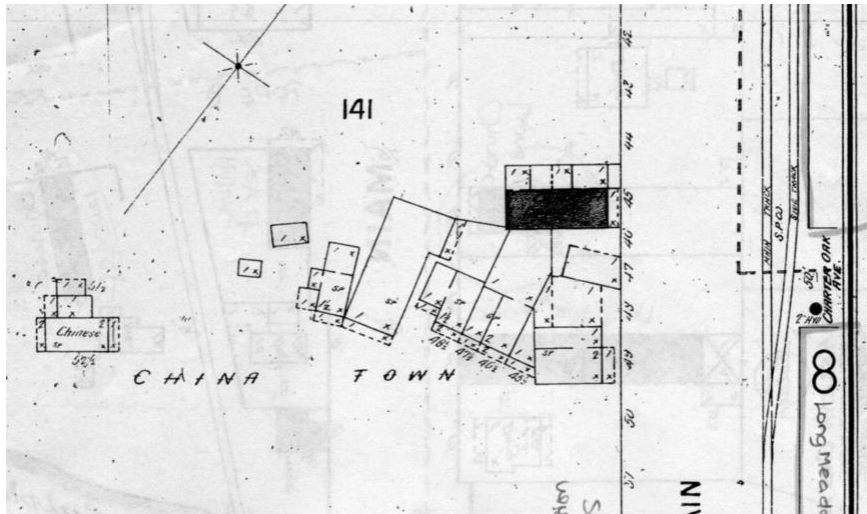
US Census 1880 showing partial list of residents of St. Helena's Chinatown

Some Chinese workers spoke English, became labor contractors, and developed good relations with grape and hops growers, mining companies, builders and quarries. Quong Goon Loong was one example, and he also sold tea, sugar, rice, slippers, and bamboo hats. Wah Chung was a prominent labor contractor in 1875. At harvest time he had 300 men waiting to harvest grapes and hops--so many that three wells went dry in Chinatown. Wah Chung had business cards printed by the St. Helena Star printers.

## The Chinese "ghetto" was located on what is now West Charter Oak Avenue

The community was set back from Main Street and ran parallel with it, described as a smoky dragon. It was the first thing a visitor would see on approaching St. Helena. Home to about 400

men at its height, there were open sewers and slaughtering going on between the shacks where people lived.



### Sanborn Fire Insurance map of St. Helena's Chinatown at Main & Charter Oak Streets. 1899

The Chinese were not allowed to own property, so their landlord was John Gillam, who provided rude, hastily thrown-up shacks made of scrap lumber. By 1870 there was a China store and Cantonese restaurant (Dillon p224). By 1884 there were boarding houses, a hotel, more stores, the employment office and a Taoist temple.



### Advertising: "Good men at cheap prices"

- Ginger's China Store was in business for 25 years and contracted labor.
- His ad in 1877 read "Chinese help furnished-San Sing at Ginger's will furnish all kinds of Chinese help. Good men at cheap prices."
- Mow Hing advertised "Charley's Wash House" on Oak Avenue every week in the newspaper in 1875, promising "no mistakes".
- In 1882 the delinquent tax list included a long list of locals, but also Ah Jim, Hop Wah & Co, Mow Fung, Yee Kay, Quong Yuen Lung, and Quong, Wing & Co.

### Chinatown's Taoist temple was completed in 1891 with dedication ceremony

The temple was located at western end of the ghetto. A grand dedication was held with entertainment by a Chinese band from Napa. During the three days, 10 roast pigs were consumed by more than 100 attendees. The newspaper described the interior: "a large table with a bronze pedestal topped by a gold-mounted dragon, surrounded by four bronzed vases and several incense burners. On both sides of the room were two long boards artistically painted with the names of the Napa and Calistoga members engraved there on. The building cost \$5000, all donated.

White locals objections stemmed from the bad impression visitors got from Chinatown's location at the approach to town. But it also stemmed from Chinese willingness to work for lower wages and

longer hours than whites, plus they did not expect room and board. Local merchants were incensed that Chinese only shopped in Chinese stores.

### **The Anti-Chinese movement spread throughout California**

In 1877 slumlord Gillam received a letter threatening to burn down Chinatown if he did not stop employing Chinese workers. The letter was printed in the newspaper, written by a barely literate agitator.

The St. Helena Star contributed to the hysteria by writing things like “tallow-colored rat eaters of the celestial kingdom are buying many guns in Napa” and “**the filthy den of disease breeding Chinamen**”. A group of St. Helenans attended a speech by Denis Kearney, the labor rabble rouser, in Napa in 1878, riding there in a rail car decorated with a banner declaring “Chinese must go!”

### **Vintners cautioned that the grape harvest would not happen without Chinese labor**

Editorials often espoused hiring white men and boys for farm labor instead of Chinese. In December 1885 300 locals met at city hall and formed an Anti-Coolie league. The Knights of Labor passed around a petition in 1886 in support of restricting Chinese immigration.

By February 1886 the Anti-Coolie league decided the best way to remove Chinatown was to buy it. Four members, Sciaroni, Simmons, Logan and Davis, pooled funds and obtained title from John Gillam. The Chinese Six companies almost beat them with a higher price. The four had acquired another property elsewhere and requested all Chinese to move there within 30 days, offering free rent for 99 years. Merchants proved they had valid leases, hired a Napa lawyer, and refused to move. The case went to US District Court, was drawn out for several years, during which time no rent was paid and the tenants stayed.

### **The Chinese were very willing to share their culture**

Ginger organized the Chinese New Year festivities for several years, providing fireworks and inviting the whole town with an ad in the newspaper. Local residents often attended the elaborate funerals. When Lee Hau, a prominent St. Helena resident, was killed by a falling tree at Niebaum’s farm in 1894, his extraordinary funeral was attended by many locals.

After a long service in Chinatown, the body was conveyed to the cemetery with a procession consisting of a wagon filled with foods for the afterlife, a hearse accompanied by six Chinese men and 50 men wearing bands of red and white. There were about 10 vehicles and another band at the end. A Chinese section at the cemetery had a large number of plots near the creek. It was important to every Chinese man to be buried with his ancestors. The bodies of those who could afford it were exhumed later and sent home.

### **Reasons for the demise of the large Chinese population of St. Helena**

- The violence and discrimination throughout the state made many feel vulnerable and they moved to larger cities.
- About the time Chinese were demanding higher wages, Italian immigrants began to arrive in the early 1880s. They replaced the Chinese for another reason too: grape vines began to be planted with the trunks pruned to waist height to protect delicate vines from frost and heat. A taller man could harvest the crop without stoop labor. (Heintz p176).



- A series of fires damaged Chinatown and finally destroyed it completely. The 1884 fire started in the upper floor of Quon Loong High China Store, which was a sleeping quarter. The big fire lit up the whole night sky and was in a line of “four old rookeries sitting back from the street”.

Three Chinese stores and lodging houses with their contents were destroyed. The landlord was uninsured, but quickly rebuilt the stores at the tenants’ urging. The 1898 fire was caused by a resident who, after cooking his dinner over an open fire, left the fire burning unattended. Half of the ghetto, 8 buildings, was completely destroyed.

#### **Four stores lost everything, including cash on hand**

The responsible party was ejected by his angry neighbors. Finally in 1911 the last fire burned the eight remaining buildings, causing \$7000 loss. The landlords who bought the property with the intent of evicting the residents in 1886, finally got their wish 25 years later.

#### **Sources:**

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