



Santa Rosa's Lost Neighborhood: Chinatown

Not much was known about Santa Rosa's bustling and colorful Chinatown that was said to have disappeared in the 1930s and 1940s "piece by piece." Song Wong Bourbeau, daughter of Tom Wing Wong and the considered mayor of Chinatown, had provided the missing link of Chinatown, the memories and history of the lost community.

Before the flourishing and thriving of Chinatown, Chinese migrants in Santa Rosa were subjected to racism, exclusion and boycotts of any Chinese businesses or any place where Chinese people worked. In the 1880s, white residents started an anti-Chinese movement that cut the Chinese population by 80 percent, forcing them to relocate to other places. Chinese residents were denied employment opportunities and signs were put up saying, "The Chinese Must Go" or "No Chinese Employed." They were stereotyped as dangerous and unpredictable people who were taking jobs away from Americans. Since they were being deliberately excluded from society and unable to receive access to jobs, many were left with no choice but to move elsewhere.

However, by the 20th century, Chinese residents made their way back to the area, where attitudes seemed to have changed about them. The set of challenges and horrible treatment they experienced did not stop them from striving for more in their communities. They went on to develop their own safe haven and community that encompassed their culture beautifully.

Chinatown was a block of restaurants, businesses, residences and a temple located on Second Street between Santa Rosa Avenue and D Street. According to Bourbeau, there were many businesses crowded into that block, which she referred to as shacks, and about 200 Chinese people living there. Her father held many occupations, including being a labor contractor, a storekeeper selling goods to Chinese workers, a landlord renting rooms to single men under the temple or above stores, the overseer of the Chinese lottery, and the spiritual leader and guardian of the temple that was next door to his family's home. Bourbeau and her husband owned a restaurant called Jam Kee, which was proudly referred to as the best Chinese restaurant in town and survived the disappearance of Chinatown until it closed in 1988.

This was the center for Chinese heritage and traditions in Santa Rosa – booming businesses, gambling and opium dens, playing lottery tickets, celebrations and connectedness within the neighborhood. However, these traditions began to diminish and the community became silenced and eventually overlooked and almost forgotten. This was due to ownership of property on Second Street, which belonged to the Hahman family and the Bisordi brothers, and the Chinese residents had no say in what was done with the property. The property was soon sold and businesses were torn down, resulting in Chinatown being replaced by other businesses



and modern, commercial buildings. These changes led to the memories and contributions of Chinatown and its residents forgotten by many Santa Rosa residents.

Luckily, thanks to community members like Song Wong Bourbeau, Chinatown, and local historians like Gaye LeBaron, their history and stories will not be forgotten and will be carried on. We encourage readers to read further into Santa Rosa's history and remember the many places and neighborhoods that might no longer exist today, but were a part of Santa Rosa's multicultural history.

References:

<https://legacy.pressdemocrat.com/news/2317072-181/lebaron-citys-rich-painful-chinese?sba=AAS>

<https://northbaydigital.sonoma.edu/digital/collection/Lebaron/id/3225/rec/1>

<https://northbaydigital.sonoma.edu/digital/collection/Lebaron/id/141/>