

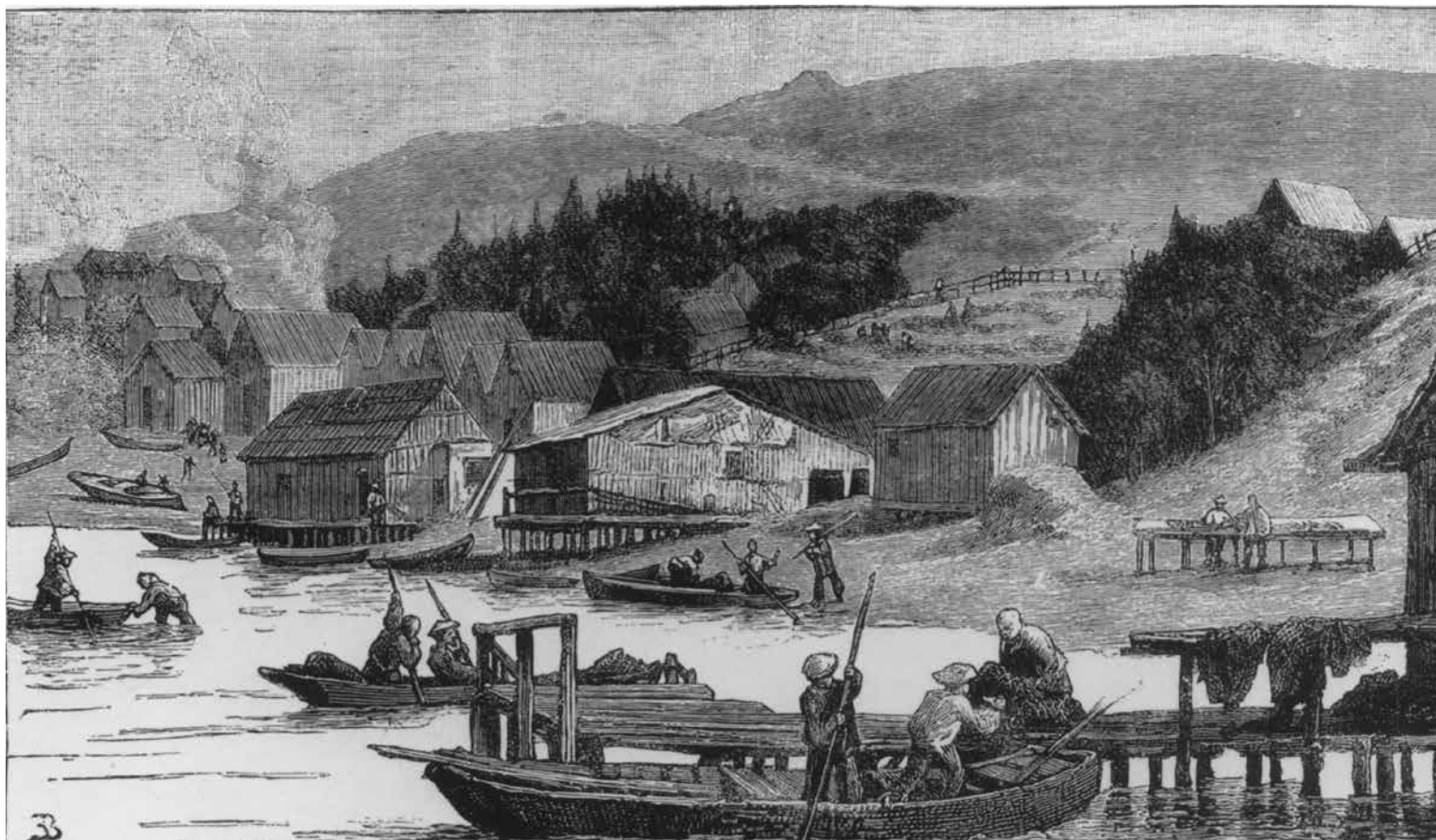


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La Peninsula

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聖馬刁縣的美籍華人



Chinese Americans
in San Mateo County

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Cover: The Chinese characters on the front cover mean “Chinese American of San Mateo County.” The sketch shows a Chinese shrimp camp at San Francisco Bay. From U.S. Commission of Fish and Fisheries, *Report, 1888*.

Chinese Americans in San Mateo County: An Introduction

by Albert A. Acena, Ph.D.

This issue of *La Peninsula* focuses upon the century-and-a-half presence of the Chinese people in San Mateo County.¹ One article deals with an industry which eventually only the Chinese worked: shrimp fishing in San Francisco Bay. This industry lasted until anti-Chinese feeling and state laws curtailed the trade. Another is a family saga. The Leong family has been in the United States and California for slightly more than a century and has been established in San Mateo for eight decades. The family's American-born second generation founded a San Mateo business which is still in the family and has become iconic to Peninsula residents. Lastly, a third article illustrates how racist attitudes toward Chinese Americans persisted into the middle of the 20th century.

California has had an ambivalent attitude towards the Chinese in its midst, or perhaps, better put, "white" California has had this ambivalence. The first Chinese to arrive in large numbers in California came in the 1850s and went to the gold fields of the Sierras. California, in the Cantonese language that most spoke, was the "Golden Mountain." In the gold country the Chinese received a mixed welcome. Later, Chinese laborers were looked upon positively when they helped to complete the transcontinental railroad. After railroad construction slowed down or ceased, Chinese laborers sought other opportunities. They were soon seen as unfair competitors for work that white workers were also seeking. The San Francisco-based Workingmen's Party that arose in the 1870s had as its slogan: "The Chinese Must Go!"

In this early period the Chinese had already suffered indignities in California. They were targeted with discriminatory mining taxes, as well as harassment in the gold country.² As a result of the decision of the

California Supreme Court in the 1854 *People v. Hall* case, where a white defendant's conviction for murder was overturned because among the witnesses against him were three Chinese, Chinese were disqualified from testifying in cases involving whites. Chinese were thus put in the same category before the California justice system as Blacks and Native Americans in those cases, whether civil or criminal, where the parties were white. In the Hall case the victim was a Chinese in Nevada County. At some point, it would dawn upon courts and reasonable lawmakers that criminals could thus too easily escape justice and eventually this ban would be lifted. A passage from the Supreme Court's ruling reveals the thinking prevalent among some: the Chinese are a "distinct people..., differing in language, opinions, color, and physical conformation; between whom and ourselves nature has placed an impassable difference...."³

With the exception of students, travelers, diplomats and merchants, the exclusion of persons born in China from entering the United States began officially in 1882 for a ten-year period and was renewed in 1892. Finally, in 1902 the exclusion was extended indefinitely. Only during World War II, in late 1943, when China and the United States faced a common foe, was exclusion finally repealed.⁴

Why would members of Congress agree to such restrictions when for most of the Union the presence of the Chinese was not an issue? The answer lies partly in the support the national parties and politicians needed from Western lawmakers for projects. But other factors also played a role, pressure from organized labor, for instance. Moreover, late 19th and early 20th century immigration laws, to speak frankly, were designed to keep America "white," or more exactly, Northern or

Western European in racial make-up. This is especially seen in the limitations placed upon immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe, as well as the Middle East, with the quotas allocated in the laws of 1920 and 1924. The 1924 National Origins Act also added the exclusion of nationals from Japan. Even as far into the century as 1952, the idea of keeping America “white” still prevailed in the immigration law of that year.

When the progenitor of the Leong family arrived in San Francisco, around 1913, he and his family probably sojourned at Angel Island, a short ferry trip north from San Francisco. From 1910 to 1940, the Angel Island Immigration Station – the “Ellis Island of the West” – processed immigrants coming into the Bay Area, no matter from where they originated.⁵ The Chinese, however, because of the exclusionary laws, were most often held in detention – the average stay being 16 days – although 95% were eventually allowed entry.⁶

If exclusion was U. S. policy, how then did Sam Leong legally enter the country? Quite simply, there was the “paper son” pathway.⁷ A Mr. Leong on this side of the Pacific claimed him as a “son.” U. S. immigration policy did allow for family reunion. What also helped was the destruction of public records in San Francisco during the fire that ensued after the April 1906 earthquake. Individuals could claim citizenship by birth or permanent residency, the records of birth or entry having been destroyed. Whether Mr. Leong already claimed citizenship or just permanent residency is not clear, but the claim enabled Sam Leong to be a “legal” immigrant in the period of exclusion. Years later, when amnesty was granted to those who had entered by the “paper son” claim and could resume their real family name, the Leongs decided to keep the name their patriarch had adopted.⁸

Another obstacle faced by the Chinese born in China and other groups ineligible for U.S. citizenship were the alien land laws which barred them from owning land in California. Their U. S.-born children, being citizens, didn’t fall under this ban. California was not alone in passing anti-alien land ownership laws; other Western



On this grave stone at Greenlawn Cemetery in Colma, the family’s paper surname of Yee is shown in English while the true family surname of Chew is indicated in Chinese. Photo courtesy of Barbara Yee Grealish.

states, such as Washington, had similar statutes on the books. In California, such restrictions would be lifted, along with anti-miscegenation laws forbidding intermarriage with whites, in the immediate post-World War II era. But there still remained into the middle of the last century instances of exclusion and of exclusivity, though more of a “private” nature.

The year 2015 marks the fiftieth anniversary of the landmark Immigration Act of 1965. This law significantly changed immigration policy which had been almost unaltered in 45 years. The impact of World War II, the Cold War, the civil rights movement, and the effort for immigration reform contributed to this development. The quota system, in effect since 1920 and reinforced in 1924, was virtually done away with; instead the Act of 1965 provided huge numbers per geographic region so as to render quotas almost meaningless. It reinforced the family reunification aspect of immigration law and gave preference to those immigrating who had special skills needed in the American economy. The new law, which went into effect in 1968, also abolished racial and ethnic discrimination in immigration policy.⁹ It would soon have an impact on demographics in the U. S. and in California.

In 1880, when the Chinese shrimpers were active in San Francisco Bay, the Chinese population of San Mateo County was around 600 and were mostly laborers or domestic workers.¹⁰ Jumping ahead to more recent times, the Chinese population in the County was 2,429, according to the 1960 census. The next enumeration, in 1970, showed the figure had risen to 5,379. In the recent 2010 census, the Chinese and Chinese Americans in the County numbered 62,372. If those claiming to be part-Chinese are also included, the total rises to 71,857.¹¹

Perhaps the future of the Chinese in California was unwittingly predicted in a passage from the *People v. Hall* decision: "The same rule which admit them to testify would admit them to all the equal rights of citizenship, and we might soon see them at the polls, in the jury box, upon the bench, and to our legislative halls."¹² More than a century and a half after, it has all come to pass. In the political sphere, Chinese Americans have held or hold state, county and municipal posts. In 1974 March Fong Eu became the State's secretary of state, the first Chinese American to hold a statewide constitutional office; since then other Chinese Americans have followed her. San Francisco has had Chinese American judges and supervisors, and in 2011 a Chinese American mayor took office. In 2009 San Mateo welcomed a new city council member, David Lim. And from 2006 until redistricting after the 2010 census altered the 8th District's boundaries, Leland Yee of San Francisco's Sunset District represented most of San Mateo County in the California State Senate.¹³

The Chinese Americans in the San Mateo County of today are fully in the fabric of the larger community – in all the professions, in civic affairs, in the burgeoning high-tech sector, in entrepreneurial activity, in the fine and performing arts, in social action and educational work. This story will continue as the arrivals since the late 1960s from Mainland China and elsewhere add their histories to the legacy of the present and past. Furthermore, their descendents are contributing immeasurably to the progress of San Mateo County.

Albert A. Acena

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Endnotes

¹ On the Chinese experience in America and California, see Iris Chang, *The Chinese in America: A Narrative History* (London and New York: Penguin, 2004), Sucheng Chan, *Asian California* (in the Golden State Series) (San Francisco: MTL/Boyd & Fraser, 1991), and Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian America*, rev. ed. (Back Bay paperback, 1998), passim on the Chinese in America. (Takaki once taught at College of San Mateo.)

² Charles J. McClain, "California's First Anti-Chinese Laws," in *Chinese America: History and Perspectives 1995* (Brisbane, CA: Chinese Historical Society of America, 1995), pp. 87-138. This is excerpted from McClain's *In Search of Equality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 139-144, text of *The People v. Hall*; the quote is on p. 144.

⁴ On the Chinese exclusion acts, material can be found in the sources cited in note 1.

⁵ On the Angel Island Immigration Station, see Robert Eric Barde, *Immigration at the Golden Gate* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2008); Erika Lee and Judy Yung, *Angel Island: Immigrant Gateway to America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Him Mark Lai, Genny Lim, Judy Yung, *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island*, 2nd ed. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014).

⁶ Lai, Lim, Yung, *Angel Island*, p. 339, and Table 1, p. 341.

⁷ Interview with Linette Marshall, January 25, 2015. On "paper sons," see Lai, Lim, Yung, *Island*, pp. 7-8, and Lee and Yung, *Angel Island*, pp. 84-85.

⁸ Marshall interview. Amnesty came through the "Confession Program" of the Immigration and Naturalization Service starting in 1956. (See Lee and Yung, *Angel Island*, p. 106, or Lai, Lim, Yung, *Island*, p. 33.)

⁹ Material on the 1965 law is in many sources. See Lai, Lim, Yung, *Island*, p. 83; Lee and Yung, *Angel Island*, pp. 316-17, and John Hayakawa Torok, "'Interest Convergence' and the Liberalization of Discriminatory Immigration and Naturalization Laws affecting Asians, 1943-1965," in *Chinese America*, pp. 11-12.

¹⁰ Mitchell Postel, *San Mateo County: A Sesquicentennial History* (Belmont, CA: Star Publishing, 2007), pp. 150-54.

¹¹ For the 1960 and 1970 census figures, see www.bayareacensus.ca.gov/counties/SanMateoCounty450.htm.

For the 2010 results, see http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/new/jsf/pages/community_facts/production.

¹² *People v. Hall*, in *Chinese America*, p. 144.

¹³ Kathryn Roethel, "Mayor, two newcomers win seats on San Mateo city council," *Peninsula Press*, Nov. 10, 2009. *Peninsula Press*. June 2, 2015.

<<http://archive.peninsulapress.com/2009/11/10/mayor-two-newcomers-win-seats-on-san-mateo-city-council>>. David Lim also served as mayor of San Mateo, Dec. 2012 to Dec. 2013.

:"March Fong Eu," Wikipedia. June 2, 2015. <<http://wikipedia.org/wiki/March.Fong.Eu>>. She was also the first Asian American in the "lower 48" to hold a statewide constitutional office.

"Ed Lee (politician)," Wikipedia. June 2, 2015. <http://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ed_Lee_%28politician%29>.

"Leland Yee," Wikipedia. June 2, 2015. <http://wikipedia.org/Leland_Yee>.

Chinese Shrimp Fisherman in San Mateo County

by Mitchell P. Postel



Shrimp village at Point San Bruno, c. 1888-1889. Photo from Fish and Wildlife Services National Archives, courtesy of San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park.

The story of early Chinese labor in San Mateo County is only dimly perceived. Some record exists that they worked on the farms of others, helped on road projects and provided the labor for the construction of the San Francisco San Jose Railroad (completed through San Mateo County in 1863). The major story of the railroad is the historically accepted premise that the “Big Four” studied this local company’s use of the Chinese when considering where a labor force could be found for the building of their Central Pacific Railroad. Nonetheless, few historic details can be surfaced about these rail-laying pioneers. The exception regarding the Chinese as a work force in San Mateo County is the story of the shrimp fishermen. All around the San Francisco Bay, the Chinese dominated this particular fishery which received considerable attention, mostly of the unwanted

variety.

The completion of the Big Four’s section of the transcontinental railroad in 1869 released thousands of Chinese workers to seek other employment. Many who had been fishermen in their native Guangdong Province sent for their specialized gear to get a start in the fishing industry along the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers and in San Francisco Bay.¹

Although the first Chinese fishing camp in California dates back to 1854 when a group of Chinese set up a small village south of Rincon Point in San Francisco,² state laws and the pressures of local white fishermen generally kept the Chinese from making much of an inroad on already established fisheries. After 1869 Chinese fishermen turned to shrimp, for which there was little white competition. Only eight boats, all

manned by Italians from San Francisco and fishing only in deep waters, were in the business in 1869. They were quickly outproduced and undersold by the Chinese, who brought to this fishery more efficient equipment and methods.³

Chinese shrimp fishermen formed small “China camps” or “fish yards” along the bay shore of Marin, San Francisco, and San Mateo counties. One of the earliest camps settled in the state was situated on the south-west side of Corkscrew Creek at Redwood slough, close to Redwood City. Evidence reveals it dates back to 1869. By 1880, a camp at today’s South San Francisco was the most important on the Bay. A federal survey from that year reveals a fish yard of 24 men equipped with 100 nets and 11 junks. A decade later, camps at Point San Bruno (then called China Point) and Hunters Point eclipsed all others in production capabilities. Other shrimp camps along the San Mateo County bay shore included one at Broadway Street and the Bay off Burlingame and one off little Coyote Point, close to the Morgan Oyster house.⁴ Federal census rolls reveal that by 1880, 177 Chinese fishermen had settled in San Mateo County, and this count is probably too low.⁵

The shrimpers constructed their vessels of redwood in canoe shape with flat bottoms to facilitate maneuvering in shallow water. Propelled by lateen sail and oars, a contemporary observer remarked, “they sail well, remaining free, and are light and buoyant....”⁶ Three- to five-man crews worked these junks, which in the 1870s and 1880s were twelve to twenty-five feet long.⁷ By 1900, some junks were fifty feet long.⁸ The Chinese fishermen used imported “bag” or “trap” nets forty-two feet long. The cone-shaped nets had one-inch mesh at the narrow end and larger openings at the wide end. In the water, they were held open by a combination of weights on one side and floats on the other. Each boat dropped a set of thirty or more nets side by side with the wide end of the cone facing the current. Shrimp, which cannot swim against a current, were trapped as the water moved through the



Drying shrimp for China, c. 1880s.

bags. In the late 1890s, daily catches averaged 7,000 pounds per boat.⁹ The fishermen took their catch to their camps, where wharf, boiling vat, drying ground, storehouse, and living quarters were located. To the outsider the village appeared as a cluster of “small rude shacks of rough, unpainted boards...”¹⁰ which seemed “devoid of all suggestions of comfort and cleanliness.”¹¹

Depending on market conditions, less than half the catch was boiled in camp and sent by launch to the fresh fish markets on Vallejo Street in San Francisco, where the shrimp sold for ten cents a pound. The rest were boiled in salted water, spread out to dry and harden, then crushed. The resulting mass was placed in a rotary-fan winnowing machine, where the meat was separated from the shell by hand cranking. Shrimp companies exported both meat and shell, mostly to China, where the meat was consumed in its dry state and the shell used for fertilizer.¹²

Some of the camps acted independently, buying the catch from the individual fishermen and then processing and selling the shrimp on their own. In some cases, individuals of the village leased the camp, boats, and equipment from companies. Most of the yards were owned outright by companies which paid the fishermen and directed operations and which usually

ran several camps. Each colony maintained its own fishing rights, and their territories were recognized by all. The companies, all Chinese managed and all based in San Francisco's Chinatown, varied from decade to decade, with ownership of the camps changing hands accordingly. One of the greatest firms was the Fook On Lung Company which controlled all three camps off South San Francisco.¹³

By 1892 the Chinese fish colonies on the San Mateo County bay line employed at least 200 men who used 48 vessels, 328 bag nets, and \$7,800 worth of shoreline properties to harvest and process the shrimp catch. That year the industry peaked as fishermen captured almost 1.5 million pounds of shrimp, valued at more than \$66,000. This represented more than one quarter of the total San Francisco Bay catch, and, as most the shrimp came from the Bay that year, this was also more than one quarter of the total for the entire Pacific slope.¹⁴

The success of the industry placed it in jeopardy, however. Since the 1880s fishermen and concerned observers had noticed declines in the fish resources of San Francisco Bay. In fact, awareness had been growing world-wide that food-fish were decreasing, and overfishing was believed to be the culprit. The United States established its Commission of Fish and Fisheries in 1870 to "investigate into the decrease of food-fishes in the waters of the United States." Advances in refrigeration and transportation had enhanced the importance of fish and shellfish as food, but marine resources were threatened by the "absence of concurrent protective legislation of a sufficiently stringent character to prevent unnecessary waste of the fish during the critical period of spawning."¹⁵ Salmon, the United States's number two commercial fish product, was already seriously damaged in the East. In California, the commission saw an opportunity to learn from the failures of eastern fisheries before permanent harm was done. It established the largest salmon hatching station in the world on the McCloud River in Shasta County to counter the effects of human damage

to California rivers.¹⁶

In the 1880s, investigators D.S. Jordan and C.H. Gilbert interviewed old-timers who had been involved in California fishing since the 1850s. They heard that "salmon...[were]...not nearly so abundant in the [Sacramento] river as formerly..." and that "all kinds of fish" were "becoming scarcer in the neighborhood of San Francisco...."¹⁷ Although some observers blamed the voracious sea lion for the decline in fish, older hands recognized that even sea lion populations had declined since the 1850s.¹⁸ Fingers began to point at the Chinese colonies, and in 1881 the Commission of Fish and Fisheries assigned Richard Rathbun to study the shrimp fishermen. He concluded:

There is little doubt but that the consumption of shrimp in and about San Francisco exceeds their rate of increase, and that they must eventually and at no distant day become much less abundant than they are at present. This is to be regretted not only because of their great value as an article of food and profit to mankind directly, but also for the reason that they form a very important part of the food of fishes, the supply of which has already become very nearly exhausted in the Bay of San Francisco. It seems imperative that some restrictions should be placed at once upon the catching of shrimp in the vicinity of San Francisco, if it is desired to keep up this important industry.¹⁹

Because the Chinese dominated the shrimp business, racial prejudice entered the picture. As early as 1862, white fishermen in San Francisco petitioned the state government to impose special taxes on Chinese who engaged in commercial fishing.²⁰ In 1880, the legislature outlawed shrimp fishing by Chinese, but the law was declared unconstitutional before it was enforced.²¹ White San Francisco fishermen then petitioned that old laws prohibiting the destructive fyke net and sturgeon trawl be enforced and that standards be developed to govern the size of the bag net's mesh.²² The *San Francisco Bulletin* often editorialized on the "heathen

Chinaman” and alerted the general population to their abuses. “Thousands of young salmon from 2 to 4 inches in length,” it reported in the mid-1880s, “may be found among the large supplies brought in daily to fish shops in the Chinese quarters, and this is undoubtedly the true explanation of the alarming decline in the quantities of the best fish. The process continued for a few years will render salmon and other favorite species a rarity in these waters, and some enactment seems to be called for, to afford protection from this particular encroachment of the Chinese scourge.”²³

California authorities took a more nuanced position. The state legislature had appointed its own Commissioners on Fisheries on February 9, 1871, to “investigate losses” and “determine protective measures” to safeguard California’s fish resources from the destruction salmon fishing had experienced in New England.²⁴ In their first report on the Chinese in 1874, the state commissioners expressed concern that unrestrained harvesting of shrimp would threaten the food supply of ocean fish which habitually came into the bay to feed.²⁵ A State Senate committee investigating the camps in the same year found that the Chinese were not a serious threat, however. Its agents observed repeated bag net hauls and reported that only negligible numbers of food fish were brought in with the shrimp, since the weights on the nets dragged their small mesh below the areas where young commercial fish normally searched for food.²⁶ Five years later, the Commissioners on Fisheries noted that overfishing contributed to the decline of fish populations but that white fishermen “by their indiscriminate destruction of young fish, and uncompromising slaughter of adults during the spawning season appear anxious to hasten...” the destruction of their own industry. Other factors were also at work, they said, and cited ash and cinder pollutions by ferryboats and steamers as well as what was perhaps the most serious threat to the commercially important marine population: “the constant fouling of the waters and consequent destruction of life by the foetid impourings of our

sewers.”²⁷

The federal government remained critical of the Chinese fishermen and the state’s lack of action against them. United States agents felt as the white fishermen did, that abuses by the Chinese were flagrant and that state officials were largely ineffective against them. In 1888 federal observer A. B. Alexander wrote that the Chinese fishermen had “...little regard for the law (if they can evade it) and absolutely no consideration for the preservation of young fish from destruction.” He criticized a lack of proper concern by California’s government and concluded:

The Chinese put the authorities to more trouble than all the other fishermen combined.... During the past year, 47 sturgeon trawls and several fyke nets were captured. There seems to be no way of ascertaining the number of sturgeon trawls and fyke nets employed on the rivers and bays adjacent to San Francisco Bay; but, judging from the frequent reports coming from different sources, it is to be presumed that illegal fishing is followed considerably. The quantity and kinds of fish which the Chinese of San Francisco expose for sale and export would indicate that a large percentage of their food-fish are caught by illicit methods.²⁸

Although the California legislature passed laws against the catching and drying of young food-fish and made efforts to enforce them, federal agents charged that the Chinese covered up illegal catches by boiling the fish down with the shrimp and selling them for use as fertilizer.²⁹

By the mid-1880s, the California State Commission of Fisheries was under pressure from federal authorities and private interests to change its policies toward the Chinese while its warnings on pollution went unheeded. In 1883, all three of the original leaders of the agency died. The new commissioners, A. B. Dibble, R. H. Buchingham, and J. D. Redding, admitted that they had “entered upon our duties as strangers to the business,”³⁰ and decided that a reappraisal of

the shrimp industry seemed necessary. In 1884 the commission declared that "...the catch of all kinds of fish will decrease to a considerable extent in the next five years if the Chinese are allowed to fish with what is known as bag nets...."³¹

The stand against bag nets placed the commission firmly on the side of the anti-Chinese agitators. In 1886, the new commissioners took steps to confirm their new position and strengthen their agency in order to enforce existing laws. The commissioners' Report for 1885-1886 recommended that the United States Congress outlaw dried shrimp sales to China, which would reduce the market by more than half. It also suggested that the state government make funds available for "a strong and active patrol police" with Deputy Commissioner W. C. Jones in command.³² Although the legislature did not take decisive action on the bag net issue for years and the Congress never criminalized the dry shrimp trade, money was appropriated to employ a patrol force and build a launch for policing the San Francisco Bay and Delta rivers.³³ Between 1884 and 1900, the commission carried on a virtual war on Chinese illegal fishing methods. In 1885 and 1886, 600 Chinese were arrested; 450 were convicted. For the next decade-and-a-half the arrest rate ran a bit less with about the same percentage of convictions.³⁴ In June of 1892, Deputy Thomas Tunstead recorded one episode:

We took a boat from Belmont to the Morgan Oyster Company's camp at the mouth of the slough, and we sailed from there in one of the company's oyster boats, dressed as fishermen....From South Belmont we sailed to the mouth of the Redwood City slough, and overhauled the two boats of the Quen Man Lee & Co., and arrested the ten men, as their catch was fully one third small fish.

A month later, Tunstead wrote of the court proceedings: "Went to San Mateo. The Chinamen were tried and convicted. Herald the fact that one jury has not shirked its duty."³⁵

John P. Babcock, another deputy working in the

San Mateo area, was much less enthusiastic about the commission's work and questioned the necessity of harassing the shrimpers as much as the patrollers did:

...we went down the bay and arrested two Chinamen who were catching sturgeon with sturgeon lines, and took them to Redwood City to await trial....We have made almost weekly trips to the Chinese shrimp stations during the season of 1891-1892, and the constant howl that we do not enforce the law as regards to the Chinese is done for some other purpose than is apparent upon the surface. These camps are regularly and systematically overhauled, and all that we can do with the means at our hands is being done, to see that they do not destroy the young fish. The drying beds at all of these camps are mostly free of small fish. I do not believe that the law is violated to the extent that is complained of.³⁶

A federal government investigation in 1896 found that shrimp exportation to China had declined.³⁷ Shrimp camps had decreased from as many as fifty during the 1880s to 26 in 1897.³⁸ In San Mateo County alone, population figures for Chinese fishermen dropped dramatically from 200 in 1890 to 28 in 1900.³⁹ By the turn-of-the-century, the only camps left in the county were the three off South San Francisco.⁴⁰ The decline in numbers of Chinese shrimp fishermen and shrimp camps from the mid-1880s to 1900 reflected several factors. Improved techniques and the use of larger boats and nets eliminated the need for some of the smaller camps, and the once seemingly bottomless market in China leveled off. Added to these changes were hounding by local white fishermen and harassment by state authorities. It can be assumed that for many of the Chinese, shrimp fishing had become a less and less desirable way to make a living.

Despite the progressive diminution of the shrimp trade, the state commission continued to assert that the most pressing problem hindering commercial fishing in the bay was the Chinese fishermen. In 1897,

the commission engaged the services of an outside specialist, N. B. Scofield of Stanford University, to help support that position. Scofield based his report on studies of a colony near San Rafael, where he found that about half the shrimpers' catch consisted of small anchovy, midshipmen, and sulpin, part of the principal diet of salmon. He recommended that fishing be stopped "...entirely during the time from April to October..."⁴¹ when the small fish are most abundant. This was also the period when shrimp fishing rendered its largest catches. By using the San Rafael camp for his study, Scofield perhaps was not as fair to the Chinese as he might have been. Most of the important camps were off Hunters Point and San Mateo County, where there were many fewer small fish than in the North Bay. The commissioners, however, agreed that a seasonal law should be enacted by the state. Claiming that eighty percent of the shrimpers' catch was dried and shipped to China, they asked, "Why should our bay be depleted of small fish that the Chinese may carry on this export?"⁴²

The commissioners' unrelenting stand on the Chinese even in the face of decline of shrimp fishing most likely stemmed from two sources. Commercial fish catches continued to fall, and by 1900 the commission had been arguing for seventeen years that elimination of the shrimpers could revive economically important marine populations. A certain amount of credibility was at stake. Moreover, since large portions of the white population believed that the Chinese represented a threat, the commissioners received a great deal of support from private and public sources. In December of 1897, for example, the *Redwood City Times Gazette* editorialized, "The next Legislature should lose no time in passing such laws as will drive the Chinese from the bay...."⁴³

The federal government, meanwhile, unearthed long forgotten trade laws and applied them to the dried shrimp traffic. In February of 1896, customs officials seized the Chinese junks *Fung Hi* and *Gaw Wo* destined for China with thousands of pounds of dried shrimp

and shell. The federal authorities arrested the Chinese captains and fined them \$1,000 each on charges based upon an old export ordinance requiring masters of ships engaged in "domestic trade" to be American citizens.⁴⁴

Prior to 1900, the Chinese responded to the threat of legislative harassment by using bribery.⁴⁵ As pressures from the state and federal fish commissions and the public created an atmosphere in which the legislature had to act, the Chinese turned to other defenses. On the last day of the old century, Chinese at San Rafael reportedly rioted against patrollers, and for two days afterwards a number of incidents flared up there.⁴⁶ Most Chinese remained peaceful, however, and chose to fight their antagonists by more sophisticated means. Shrimp company owners in 1900 employed attorneys to act as lobbyists in Sacramento and enlisted legal aides to represent employees prosecuted under the existing fishing laws.⁴⁷

Nonetheless in 1901 the legislature banned commercial shrimp fishing from May through September. The lawyers employed by the shrimp companies suggested that a boat crew purposefully allow itself to be arrested to test the new regulations in court. They believed the ordinance invaded the right of property and interfered with the practice of a legitimate business. Between 1901 and 1903, six attorneys fought to kill the law. First came hearings in the Police Court and the Superior Court of San Francisco. After the expected defeats there, the issue was appealed in the State Supreme Court and met with failure again. The legal experts then attempted to apply to the Federal District Court, but Judge DeHaven refused to receive the case. Finally in 1903, the lawyers for the Chinese managed to put the matter before the United States Supreme Court. Here too in *Ah King vs. the Superior Court of San Francisco*, the verdict went against the shrimp companies.⁴⁸

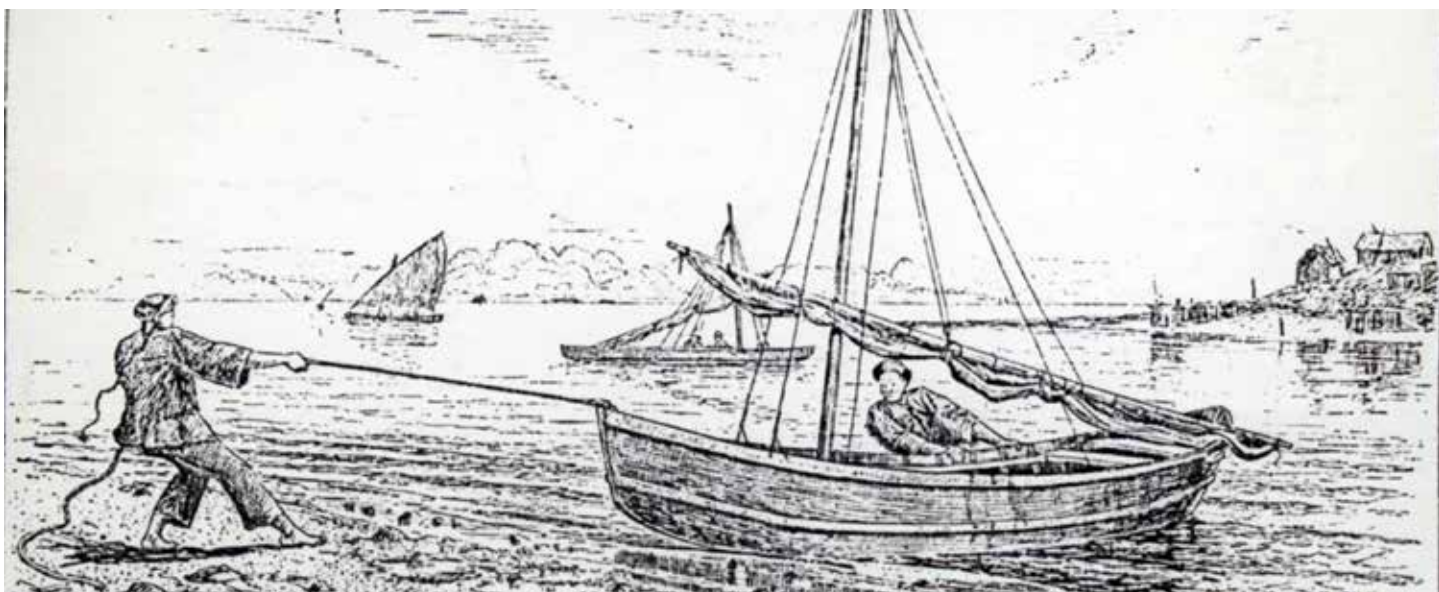
Meanwhile the law setting a season for shrimp fishing was in effect and reduced the shrimp industry to a marked degree. Of the fifty-some Chinese fishing vessels present in the Bay in the mid-1880s, thirty

remained in service by 1904, and one year later only twenty-one junks sailed for the shrimp companies. Admitting defeat in the courtroom, representatives of the shrimp dealers attempted to make a deal with the state commissioners before the legislature convened in 1905. In exchange for giving up their attack on the law through the legal system, they asked that two months be taken off the closed season.⁴⁹ The state agency dismissed the petitions presented by the appellants but recommended to the legislature that a twelve-month open season be reinstated – and that the export of dried shrimp be forbidden. As the commission knew, “this...meant putting out of business about two thirds of the boats and depriving them entirely of the profits of exportation.”⁵⁰ Once again lawyers were called to combat the restriction, and once again they failed to reverse the actions of the commissioners and legislature. Operational boats decreased from twenty-one in 1905 to just fourteen in 1906, working with smaller crews and for fewer hours.⁵¹

By 1909, the commissioners realized that some shrimp dealers had stayed in business by supplementing their local fresh shrimp with a smuggling operation. Sending the dried shrimp in barrels and boxes labeled “seaweed,” “fertilizer,” “coffee,” and

“beans,” the Chinese had kept up their lucrative overseas trade. The commissioners then asked the legislature to reinstitute the seasonal law in the hope that seasonal unemployment would drive experienced crews to seek other work and deprive the shrimp companies of their labor force.⁵² The fatal blow to the shrimp industry came in 1910, when the legislature finally outlawed the bag net. The ban effectively destroyed the last vestiges of the original Chinese commercial shrimp fishing operations.⁵³

The commissioners expected alternative devices to be invented for catching shrimp without destroying the populations of other marine resources. After five years, however, this had not occurred, and shrimp virtually disappeared from the California market. Commercial interests and many individual consumers demanded that the shrimp trade be reinstated. In 1915, on the recommendation of the commission, shrimp fishing with bag nets became legal again in an area called District 13 which encompassed all of San Francisco Bay south of Hunters Point. Somewhat of a revival occurred as the camps along Hunters Point began operations anew.⁵⁴ However, commercial shrimp fishing off the San Mateo County bay line had ended for good.



Shrimp fisherman hauling in a boat, c. 1889. Sketch by C.B. Hudson. From *Bulletin of the United States Fish Commission*, 1890.

Mitchell P. Postel

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This article is adapted from his essay "A Lost Resource: Shellfish in San Francisco Bay," *California History* (March 1988), pp. 26-41.

Endnotes

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- ²⁰ *Resolutions unanimously adopted of the Fisherman of the Bay of San Francisco*, 1/13/1862.
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⁴⁶ *San Francisco Examiner*, 1/1/1900, 1/2/1900.

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Ah Sam

by Nellie W. Leong



Ah Sam, c. 1946. Photo courtesy of the Leong Family.

Around 1913, “Sam” Shun Leong and his wife Wong Shee came to the United States from Canton (now called Guangdong), China, for a better life. They settled in Oakland, California, with their daughter, Louise, who was born in China in 1905. They had four other children while they were living in Oakland. Gordon was born on April 22, 1915, Mable was born on May 25, 1917, Lincoln was born on September 12, 1920, and Howard Arthur was born on September 20, 1921.

“Sam” Shun Leong was a fruit and vegetable peddler. He moved his family from Oakland to San Mateo in 1931 when he heard that a lucrative fruit and vegetable route in San Mateo was for sale. He was told that there was a wealthier class of clients in San Mateo who spent more money. This could result in better sales, and he wanted to improve life for his wife and young children. At that time, his oldest son Gordon was 16, daughter Mable was 14, Lincoln was 11, and youngest child Howard Arthur was 10. Shun Leong’s first born, daughter

Louise, was already 26, married, and beginning a family of her own in Arkansas.

In the summer of 1932, after graduating from San Mateo High School, oldest son Gordon went to work as a waiter in a small Chinese restaurant. He received a salary of \$20 a month plus two meals. After a few months, Gordon heard of a job as driver for a Chinese florist at \$30 a month. Realizing that the florist position represented a 50% pay increase, he moved on to the new job. The owner of the flower shop, Ah Fong Florist, was not a florist in the modern sense. He merely sold loose, cut flowers in bunches out of cans and buckets. He had no design capability and had no other employees, but he needed someone to be a driver and to help sell and wrap flowers for his customers.

Gordon worked for Ah Fong Florist for about a year. This “florist” conducted his business in a shack in south San Mateo on El Camino Real near the current Hillsdale Branch of Bank of America. During this period,



L-R: Mable, Lincoln, Sam, Art, Louise, Wong Shee and Gordon Leong, c. 1924. Photo courtesy of the Leong Family.

Gordon observed all the facets of the flower business and decided that profits were much better in cut flowers than selling produce from a truck to regular customers as his father did. After speaking with his father, Gordon decided to go into business for himself.

The next decision involved finding a location to start business. Of course, there was a lot of foot traffic, as well as auto traffic in downtown San Mateo, but store rents were too high. Sam Leong was just able to feed and clothe his family, and the rent for the old house that the family rented on 3rd Avenue in downtown San Mateo was \$25 a month. After a week's search in 1933, Gordon found a small, closed-down grocery store with living quarters in the rear at the very south end of town. Rent for this empty store was \$30 a month. The entire family moved into this "country" location from their rented home in downtown San Mateo.

Money was needed to start the business, so older sister Louise, who was married to a grocer and still living in Arkansas, was asked to lend \$50. Gordon used the money to buy cheap, plain flower cans, paint and flowers. Gordon and Lincoln painted the metal cans green to give them a better look. Gordon opened the new business in the midst of the Depression on September 21, 1933.

The location in San Mateo was an isolated spot near 28th Avenue on El Camino Real, then a woodsy and lightly traveled two-lane road running through the pastures of cows and horses. The shop was named Ah Sam in honor of Gordon's father who gradually retired from the door-to-door fruit and vegetable vending business to help his son by going to the flower market to pick up supplies. To explain the meaning of Ah Sam, *Ah* is the informal way of saying "Sir" or "Mister" in Chinese, and Sam is the anglicized version of the father's first name. With their first sale of two bunches of chrysanthemums for 35 cents, Ah Sam was officially in business.

After two months, money ran out so another \$50 was borrowed from Louise. Sales in the third and fourth months gained slowly. The little store faced the afternoon sun from the west, and flowers were wilting before they were sold. Louise sent another \$50 to purchase an awning. This was the last money borrowed from Louise, for after losing money for eight consecutive months, the ninth month showed a profit. It was a good omen as the Chinese have considered "9" the very best number for centuries. Profits after this period paid for a neon sign with the name "Ah Sam Florist." The family continued paying rent for this place for approximately four years until they could afford to buy the property.

During his school years at San Mateo High School and San Mateo Junior College, Lincoln helped his older brother after school. Mable completed her education at San Mateo High School and earned a little extra money performing domestic work for a Hillsborough family while attending San Mateo Junior College. She graduated with honors and then joined her brothers at Ah Sam. Youngest brother Howard Arthur, known as Art, joined the business in 1936 at the age of 15 to help out, as it was not yet feasible to hire help. Mable and Art had natural artistic talent without ever taking any floral design classes.

There was only room in the cramped combination store and living quarters for a single, home-style refrigerator to hold gardenias and roses. It was

purchased at Montgomery Ward in Burlingame for \$5 down and \$5 monthly payments. Since there was no other refrigeration, funeral sprays that were made for early delivery the next morning would be placed on the cool linoleum floor under the beds in the bedroom, which was located next to the kitchen.

After their father retired from the door-to-door vending business, the family had the use of his fruit and vegetable truck to pick up supplies at the flower market. When the brothers saved enough money, they purchased a used Chevrolet panel truck for the business. Distant cousin, Lee Yee, whose family was in the chrysanthemum growing business in San Mateo, had a farm located on property that is now the intersection of Highway 92 and Alameda de las Pulgas. Each day they would pick the flowers in the daytime and pack them in cartons for delivery to the San Francisco flower market for sale. However, Lee's father did not know how to drive his 1935 Ford panel station wagon, so he asked Lincoln to drive the load to the market in the evenings, to be ready for the next morning's sales. Between 1937 and 1939, Lincoln borrowed the Yee family's station wagon to use as an additional vehicle for deliveries during holidays and busy periods. Moreover, until his oldest son learned to drive and received his driver's license, Mr. Yee was generous in allowing Lincoln to keep the station wagon at Ah Sam for use during day hours.

The year 1939 saw much growth, and it was fortunate that Gordon and Lincoln were handy with saw and hammer. The brothers personally built their first glasshouse, 25 feet x 40 feet. The brothers also built their first lathhouse to grow camellias and other plants needing protection from the elements. During that year there was a building expansion to double the frontage of the original small store with an addition on the north side.

Improvements continued in 1940 when Gordon and Lincoln built their first walk-in refrigerator. By now, the family's hard work enabled them to save enough money to buy two lots to the south of the store, which are now



Lincoln teaching class at San Francisco City College. Photo courtesy of the Leong Family.

the locations of the greenhouse display and sales areas.

Just before the beginning of World War II in 1941, the brothers borrowed a metal block and tackle from a neighboring auto wrecking company to raise a 19-foot long iron beam for a new workroom in the expanded area. This new workroom, 25 feet x 40 feet, was built for flower preparation and flower design. Previously, the family kitchen was utilized to do design and funeral work.

There was a small florist, The Towne Florist, located in downtown San Mateo on El Camino Real, north of Mills Hospital. In 1942 the owners, a Japanese family, had to leave for relocation camp. Ah Sam Florist took over the lease, and Art was sent to manage the flower shop. Mable also helped by answering the telephone.

Also in 1942, the three brothers built a two-story residence building at the rear of the property with a 4-car garage. Now, each brother could have his own bedroom. Today, this building still stands, and the garage floor has been converted to two stock rooms for floral supplies and containers for daily use.

In 1944, two more lots were acquired to the north of the main building for future expansion. This area is now the customer parking lot. The family kept busy during the war years and post-war years while Lincoln served in the U. S. Army Air Forces with duty in the Philippines.



Floral display at Ah Sam, March 23, 1951. Photo courtesy of the Leong Family.

After his discharge in 1946, he returned to help the family business.

With the war over, Ah Sam bought The Towne Florist as the Japanese owners either didn't want to return or they didn't want to run the shop. However, by 1949, the family closed it because the same customers were patronizing both locations. So, they concentrated on building the business at Ah Sam, which had better foot traffic. Additionally, Art and Mable were needed there.

In 1950, seventeen years after they started the flower business, the brothers and sister borrowed \$20,000 from a neighborhood bank for a major expansion. Architectural plans were completed, and a general contractor constructed an entire new building on the site, fifteen times the size of the original grocery store. The family conducted business in makeshift fashion for a year while a new main sales area and a new walk-in cooler were being constructed. In March 1951, Ah Sam was able to conduct business in a fresh, spacious sales showroom with separate greenhouses to display a large variety of plants. Sam Leong did not see this latest achievement of his children's dream to honor their father. He had died in 1944.

As the years passed, the business continued to blossom and it became necessary to divide responsibilities. Gordon became a very astute buyer

and took charge of all flower and plant buying. He would get up at 3 a.m. in order to be at the San Francisco Flower Market when the growers arrived with their merchandise so that he could pick the best quality flowers, greens, plants, as well as any new or unusual items. In later years, Gordon did not have to go to market until 5:00 a.m. or 6:00 a.m. as he was able to find a friend at one of the market stalls who would gather all the supplies ordered for that day's pickup. Consequently, Gordon only had to back his truck up at one spot and helpers would load for him.

He was also very knowledgeable about mechanics and handled all delivery truck and auto repairs until the company thought it was feasible to contract with vehicle service firms. Another of Gordon's skills was the handling of electrical and plumbing problems on the property. He was often seen on a ladder or digging around pipes to resolve an emergency problem. Gordon also loved scouting for good designers and managers for the firm. Through his connections with the San Francisco Flower Market, he was successful in luring top employees from other florists to come to Ah Sam. Those employees many times served as excellent, responsible and loyal long-term supervisors.

Mable's intelligence, patience and natural creative ability enabled her to establish a rapport with Ah Sam's growing clientele of society families. She came to know each family's tastes in flowers and colors. She had a way with all the customers and also had a sharp memory for clients' names, faces, background and the particular tastes of each. Her personality endeared her to her customers, and often the clients continued to ask for her, and no one else, whenever they needed to order flowers and decorations. Through the years, Mable's close relationship with many customers made her feel like part of their families. She was invited to their social events at their homes and at the Burlingame Country Club. She also attended many of the weddings and debuts that she planned and decorated. Mable's design style was one of traditional and understated elegance.

Lincoln was given the responsibility of public relations

and professional connections. He represented Ah Sam while working with local, district, state and national organizations. He moved up the ranks of many of these and held some offices and leadership positions multiple times until his retirement. Among his activities, he served on the Advisory Board of the Retail Floristry Department at San Francisco City College and held a similar position at the College of San Mateo. To the end of his life, he was a trustee of the Joseph Shinoda Foundation, a scholarship fund to encourage promising young florists to serve the industry.

Lincoln also supervised all deliveries to the increasingly large area served by Ah Sam, as he had a great memory for streets and directions. In the early years, deliveries covered the area around San Mateo. As business increased, public demand for floral designs and event decorations resulted in expansion of the delivery area to as far south as San Jose, as far north as Marin County and to the entire East Bay. During the period before modern computerized driving directions, Lincoln was able to efficiently give all his delivery persons the quickest and most direct routing for delivery, and always incorporated priority and time-sensitive deliveries in his management decisions.

All the family members, while entrusted with other duties, could make funeral pieces or rose arrangements or fill rush orders when the need arose. Lincoln was very meticulous in making special pieces such as hearts, pillows, crosses and other unusual designs. He even made a tearful bride happy on a Sunday morning, although the store was closed, by creating a lovely bridal bouquet to replace the one she had ordered from another florist. Another talent that Lincoln possessed was that of building wood props for the store's use and for special customer requests. He only needed to look at a picture to create a gazebo for window displays or for decorations for garden weddings. He also designed buffet table centerpieces. Among his props, he built a large gazebo with a different look and style than ones he built previously, a flower cart, and a Japanese teahouse. The most complex prop that he built was an authentic

Japanese sacred bridge, 30 feet long, which was needed for a debut party in Woodside. The bridge had to be gracefully arched with a clear span and placed across a swimming pool. It had to be engineered for both lightness in weight and yet have enough strength to hold 30 people. Amazingly, it was constructed so that two men dismantled it in one hour.

Art, the artistic member of the family, devoted his time to the creation of beautiful floral designs and window displays. He and Mable were in charge of store décor, gift buying and decorating jobs. The two went to the Los Angeles and New York annual gift shows to look for new ideas, new containers and baskets for arrangements, plants, and store display. In January of each year they planned the theme and décor for the next Christmas season from ideas discovered at the gift shows.

Art was proud of Ah Sam's growing reputation for artistry and good taste in floral design. His natural artistic talent was exhibited in high style through massive arrangements used as show pieces. His wedding bouquets had a distinctive look and were very elegant. He designed special casket pieces for clients with specific tastes who wanted understated elegance. Art was invited to be guest designer at industry wedding workshops and at a national convention.

In addition to the immediate family, Uncle John Ju was invited to join Ah Sam in 1952 to be in charge of growing plants, as there was now a large nursery area, as well as lathhouses and greenhouses to maintain. Gordon's theory was that he could grow better plants, at less cost, than what he bought at the wholesale nurseries and the flower market. He was always on the lookout for new and unusual plant species and varieties so that he could bring them back to the store and ask Uncle John to propagate new plants from the original ones. Soon, the nurseries were filled with a sea of green plants for dish gardens and planters, hundreds and hundreds of seasonal blooming plants such as hydrangeas, African violets, cyclamen, and many varieties of novelty plants such as pepper plants.



Art arranging a floral display for a big event. Photo courtesy of the Leong Family.

Uncle John supervised the growing of many hundreds of Easter lilies annually for the spring season and many thousands of poinsettia varieties and azaleas for the winter holiday season. He was an invaluable part of Ah Sam and worked until his retirement in 1989.

The family's biggest acquisition of property was a large piece of land purchased in 1953, which extended from the alley behind the main store to the railroad tracks, approximately two acres. This was used for new greenhouses, lathhouses, additional parking and a future warehouse. A building was included to house the boilers for the greenhouses. This facility was utilized later for a workshop to build large, special props for decorating jobs calling for a special theme.

A gift room was added to the north side of the main building in 1954, adjacent to the delivery dispatch area, to provide a separate place to display the increasing inventory of gift accessories, containers, and imported crystal and china items. The brothers had done their own construction of the first four glass houses, including installation of the water pipes and special cast iron radiant heating piping. Now \$50,000 was needed

to build a warehouse and additional glass houses, as potted plants were steadily increasing the percentage of the total sales. A much needed, two-story warehouse was built on the rear property in 1956 to house supplies, large props, and another large walk-in refrigerator for flower storage.

After 1956 the employee list increased to approximately 25 plus family members. But by the early 1970s the employee staff swelled to approximately 60 and up to 90 at holiday times. By that time, a flower preparation room, 2nd floor offices and a loading dock were added. The delivery department was happy to be able to move to the new loading dock area to the rear of the main building in order to have more space for the increasing volume of deliveries.

Continued growth and the increasing number of employees forced the family to purchase a small piece of land facing 25th Avenue to be used for staff parking. Ah Sam continued to prosper but Art's untimely death in September 1980 dealt a blow to the family. Nevertheless, in the early part of the 1980s, a portion of the main floor of the warehouse was partitioned off for a funeral & production room, due to overcrowding in the main store design room.

In the autumn of 1982, after long discussions and deliberations, the Leong family decided to branch out with a shop in the lobby of the Fairmont Hotel in San Francisco. The Leongs were certainly influenced by the persuasiveness of the Swig family, owners of the hotel. Instead of the usual uninteresting look of a hotel shop, a designer was summoned to draw plans to create a storefront in the hotel lobby, which incorporated a refrigerated "window." The owners of the hotel approved this plan and, through the years, the storefront design generated many complimentary remarks from florists around the world. A change in the ownership of the Fairmont Hotel and fundamental differences in business philosophy resulted in the closing of this branch shop.

Ah Sam was built on the principles of hard work, integrity, personalized attention, and exceptionally

creative floral products. Its clients span the entire San Francisco Peninsula and actually span the nation.

From the mid-1950s on, Mable's natural style of understated elegance and Art's distinctive talent for high style designs began to attract the attention of the social elite of San Francisco and the Peninsula. From that period until 1985, Ah Sam decorated magnificent homes, country clubs, and hotel ballrooms for some of the most elaborate social affairs in the San Francisco Bay Area's history. Increasingly, the more discriminating customers sought Ah Sam to do their weddings, debutante parties and balls, and special celebrations. Also, Ah Sam began receiving decorating requests from many commercial firms to celebrate business milestones, holidays and important events. Even the planning for funerals of the prominent members of society resulted in a beautiful look of understated elegance.

This is not to say that the major portion of Ah Sam's business was composed of grandiose affairs. Actually, the large decorating jobs were not the core of the business. It was the everyday customer that remained most important. While Ah Sam's unique history included serving such names as Crocker, Bovet, Tobin, Roth, de Guigne, Spreckels, Hearst, Davies, and the like, the same care and attention was given to patrons who lived next door or up the street.

Of course, through the years, Ah Sam's staff experienced the excitement of meeting celebrities including Rosalind Russell, Ray Bolger, Rhonda Fleming, Liberace, Bing and Kathryn Crosby and Beverly Sills. Shirley Temple Black and Merv Griffin were Ah Sam's customers until they reached retirement age. In 1981, Ah Sam created the wedding scene for the premiere of the television series *Dynasty* when Linda Evans and John Forsyth tied the knot with Woodside's Filoli used as the set. Flowers by the tens of thousands were used to create the lavish background needed for the storyline.

Among many thrilling assignments, Ah Sam's staff remembers the phone call that Mable Leong received from the White House in 1983 with the request to do

the decorations for Queen Elizabeth II's state visit to be held at the de Young Museum in March of that year. Ah Sam's selected staff, headed by Mable, cleared White House security, and each were given official IDs to wear in order to get in and out of the museum. They created centerpieces and room décor with the overall effect of a "natural forest lit by fireflies," acquiring Queen Elizabeth's approval at the State Dinner in the museum's Great Court. In addition, the staff decorated a private dining room at Trader Vic's with just several hours notice, and under tight security, when the Queen and Prince Philip indicated a wish to "eat out." While the *Britannia* was docked at a San Francisco pier during this historic three-day State visit, President and Mrs. Ronald Reagan were invited to dinner by the Queen to celebrate their 30th wedding anniversary. Again, Ah Sam was honored to supply the floral centerpieces for the private dinner. Word was received after that event that the Queen and Mrs. Reagan loved all the floral arrangements. Scurrying, hustling and bustling, within protocol and security restraints, made those three days most memorable.

In June 1990, Ah Sam decorated the entire stage at Stanford University for the visit of President and Mrs. Gorbachev of the Soviet Union. Tasteful plant groupings softened by airy trees lessened the starkness of the stage and helped to camouflage the security measures that were set up. One of the Ah Sam staff, an intern from Holland, made beautiful hand-tied bouquets that were presented to the Gorbachevs upon their arrival on the Stanford campus.

The staff at Ah Sam has traditionally gone to great lengths to uphold the company's reputation of pleasing its customers. In recent years, Ah Sam's staff has been fortunate to have at their fingertips greenhouses filled with an extensive inventories of green plants, plus large selections of domestically grown fresh flowers and a great variety of exotic flowers imported from around the world. In addition, a warehouse full of props provided Ah Sam designers the extra touch to create breathtaking and beautiful floral decorations for every

occasion and mood.

Art served as Vice-President until his death in September 1980 at the age of 59. Gordon led the company as President until his retirement in 1982 after devoting almost 50 years to Ah Sam. He sold his shares back to the Ah Sam business in the spring of 1986. He died in February 1998, short of his 83rd birthday. Mable was Secretary-Treasurer of the company until she inherited the presidency in 1982. Her death in May 1986 at the age of 69 left a big void in the organization. Lincoln was Senior Vice-President until his retirement in 1988 after 55 years of service. He died in August 2001, three weeks short of his 81st birthday.

Uncle John Ju, who had been in charge of growing plants since 1952, retired in the spring of 1989. In the last years of his employment, he supervised the plant growing on a part-time basis in the last years of his employment. He and his wife Nancy, who helped part-time in the flower room and wedding department, were highly respected by the entire staff.

Gordon hired distant cousin Lee Yee, a veteran of the Korean War, for duties as the company's Office Manager in October 1952. Lee remained in that position until 1989, when his duties were changed to manager of the nurseries and supervisor of plant growing. He continued to supervise the nursery as well as other facilities operations until his retirement in 2006.

Lincoln's wife, Nellie, worked part time in the office from 1952 to 1967 while raising a family. She started working full time in 1967 and, through the years, carried out duties as Assistant Office Manager, Office Manager, Sales Supervisor, and Administrative Assistant for Administration and Personnel. Nellie retired from the company in 1992 after 40 years of service.

After Mable's brief illness and subsequent death in May 1986, Art Leong's family acquired the remainder of the stock of Ah Sam Incorporated. The Art Leong family includes his widow Mayme, sons Steve, Scott, and Shawn, and daughter Stacey. Second son, Scott, became the new President of the company at the age of 29.

Today, Ah Sam's long-standing location on San Mateo's El Camino Real is familiar to many. It remains one of the largest single-store floral operations in the western United States and continues to rank among the top florists in the nation. Hard work, dedication and creative artistic ability have resulted in its recognition as a top-rated and distinctive retail floral operation for many, here and abroad.



Art Leong's family continues to operate Ah Sam.

Editor's Note

Nellie Leong, Lincoln Leong's wife, wrote a history of Ah Sam in 1992. Historical information was contributed by Lincoln C. Leong, Mable C. Leong, Lee D. Yee, and Frances C. Leong. The article was edited and updated for this publication.

The Cases of Sing Sheng and Robert U.M. Ting

by Mitchell P. Postel



Grace, Richard and Sing Sheng in February 1952. *San Mateo Times* Collection.

During the 1950s, America was wrestling with two gigantic issues, race relations and the spread of global Communism. Two local Chinese American families, both composed of attractive married couples and their two-year-old sons, innocently found themselves within the vortex of these national concerns.

Sing Sheng Family

Sing Sheng was a Nationalist Chinese intelligence agent during World War II.¹ He came to the United States in 1947, to study for diplomatic service. However, when the Communists took over China in 1949, he decided to stay in the United States.² He

graduated from Earlham College in Richmond, Indiana, and married a Chinese American woman named Grace. In 1950, they gave birth to a son, Richard, and by 1952, with Sing Sheng's mother and sister, were living in a cramped apartment at 47 Eagle Avenue in San Francisco's Chinatown.

With another baby on its way, 26-year-old Sheng and his pregnant wife decided to pursue the "American Dream" by buying a single family house down on the Peninsula.

Being that Sheng had a job as a mechanic at Pan American Airways at San Francisco International Airport, the family reasoned a home in north San Mateo County was desirable. They came to select a house at 726 West Orange Avenue near the California Golf Club in the Southwood area of South San Francisco. They signed a purchasing agreement for \$12,300 and made a down payment of \$2,950. They then got busy and bought \$1,000 worth of furniture for their new home.

Sadly, at this point racial intolerance raised its ugly head. Some of the Sheng's potential neighbors began to protest. Later Sing Sheng revealed to local newspapers that:

At first they did try to use a little bit of a threat. It was suggested that little children might throw rocks and dump garbage on the house if I bought it....

I wondered how the children would know which house to throw rocks at unless someone told them.

On February 1, 1952, Sheng was invited to a neighborhood meeting for a "calm discussion" on the matter. Sheng remarked:

I looked forward to the meeting... I thought it would be a challenge. In this country all my friends have been very nice. I didn't know

about any race prejudice at all until I came to Southwood.

Some 75 homeowners attended. They assured Sheng that they had no personal animosity toward him, but were afraid that if the neighborhood lost its status as “restricted” (whites only), the value of their houses would decrease. Sheng was “sure everybody really believed in democracy,” so he offered an all-American solution. He would leave it up to his potential Southwood neighbors and let them vote on the matter. He assured them that if the ballots added up to opposing his family moving in, he would abide by the results and not take possession of the house.

Within 48 hours ballots were printed and then mailed. It was explained that acting “unofficially,” South San Francisco City Manager Emmons McClung would supervise the counting to take place on February 15. Sheng meanwhile repeated to local newspapers that he would stand by the results: “Whichever way it turns out, I will have done my little share for this democracy about which people talk.”

The builders of the Southwood homes, American Homes Development Company, entered the picture by getting out a letter to the homeowners urging them to protect their private property rights and hold on to the “restrictive covenants” on their purchasing agreements.

The Sheng family decided to also send a letter. In it, Sheng referred to international events (the Korean War was raging as the world also found itself in a Cold War between western nations and the Communist bloc) and the need for Americans to stand by their patriotic beliefs:

The present world conflict is not between individual nations, but between Communism and Democracy. We think so highly of Democracy because it offers freedom and equality. America’s forefathers fought for these principles and won the independence of 1776.

We have forsaken all our beloved in China and have come to this country seeking the same basic rights. Do not make us the victims



Crowd at the Southwood neighborhood meeting, February 1, 1952. Grace is shown sitting next to the empty chair. *San Mateo Times* Collection.

of False Democracy. Please vote in favor of us.

The showdown took place in a neighborhood garage. Reporters described a very crowded scene. Among those in attendance were the Sheng family. *San Francisco Chronicle* journalist Bernard Taper also was there. He described Sheng as “dressed in a double-breasted blue suit.” He sat at the balloting table. Grace sat in the front row. Taper noted: “Her baby is due to be born on February 22, – Washington’s Birthday.”

Just before the votes were to be counted, Edward Howden, executive director of the San Francisco Council for Civic Unity, informed the homeowners, that a new “scientific study” analyzing the economic effect of mixing races and property values in the Bay Area was near completion and urged that the vote be postponed until everyone had a chance to review the report.

According to Taper: “Voices from the back of the garage shouted this down.” Someone spoke out: “Let’s get on with it. Let’s not fool around anymore.”

The process was by secret ballot. Each vote was read aloud by McClung and then tallied on a chalk board. Taper lamented: “The Shengs heard McClung read the phrase, ‘I object,’ 174 times... By the end of the balloting they looked crushed.” Just 28 voted in favor of ignoring the restrictive covenant. In his column



City Manager Emmons McClung (second from left) sits next to Sing Sheng during the counting of the ballots, February 1, 1952. *San Mateo Times* Collection.

the next day, Taper reported:

Residents of the Southwood district of South San Francisco were triumphant yesterday in their efforts to keep their neighborhood 100 percent Caucasian...they told Sing Sheng, a former Chinese Nationalist intelligence officer, that they did not want him, his pretty wife and small son as neighbors.

He wrote that after the tally: "a silence followed." Sheng then stood up and addressed the crowd. His family would abide by the vote:

We'll have to sell the furniture we bought and go somewhere else to live. I hope you people will be happy in your community and that your property values will increase every day.

According to Taper: "The homeowners exchanged jubilant remarks as they drifted out of the hall." He tried to get some quotes, but none would give their names. Many "...were indignant at *The Chronicle* for reporting the story in the first place." Taper mentioned that the Shengs had recourse if they wanted it. The United States Supreme Court had a few years before [1947] found "restrictive covenants" on properties to be

unconstitutional. However, the Shengs were clearly not anxious to keep up the fight. Taper concluded: "As this is 'Brotherhood Week,' the Shengs are hopeful they will have better success in their renewed search."

No one at the time could have predicted the enormous attention this seemingly local incident generated. For the Southwood residents it was time to close ranks. According to Taper they were "forming a neighborhood association to prevent any future 'threat' of non-Caucasians moving in."

However, the story was soon to turn global. Both United Press (U.P.) and Associated Press (A.P.) had sent photographers to the gathering. The U.P. photo, dated February 17, showed the Shengs, an attractive couple with two-year-old Richard on a tricycle. The caption headline read "Unwanted Neighbors," and a brief recap of the incident followed. A.P. featured a photo of pregnant Grace, brushing "a tear from her eyes."

Also, *Chronicle* journalist Bernard Taper was not even close to letting go of the story, and in Taper, the homeowners of Southwood had a dedicated adversary. He may have felt some sympathy for Sing Sheng because he had also served in military intelligence

during World War II. In fact, he was one of the famous “monuments men” who combed Europe looking for art treasures stolen by the Nazis. He went on to have a distinguished career as a journalist which included several years with the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

On February 18, the *Chronicle* ran his first story on the growing controversy since his piece on “the election.” His headline read “Homes are Offered to Excluded Chinese.” Taper reported:

There was some consolation for Sheng yesterday in the public response to news of this election.

His phone was probably one of the busiest in San Francisco, as people called to express their concern and voice their indignation.

By yesterday afternoon 20 property owners in the Bay Area had phoned Sheng offering houses for sale to him.

There were also calls from other states. One from Wichita, Kansas, for example, came with the proposition of a job thrown-in. Taper asked Sheng how the family was taking things. He spoke about Grace:

The main thing she’s disappointed about is the backyard. She thinks Richard ought to have a place to play.

In the meantime, Sheng spoke about his efforts trying to get back the \$1,000 he had spent on new furniture. Sheng then reflected for Taper: “I still have confidence in most of those people – but I think they were misled by a few.” Then he pointed to Richard and added: “I wish they’d find out so this kind of thing could be wiped out before he grows up.”⁴

In this article, Taper mentioned that the national press was now involved. He described how the *New York Herald Tribune* had run a front page story on it, and that the *New York Times* and *Chicago Tribune* were also giving it “special coverage.” Indeed not just print media but the radio networks and news reels had picked up the story. On the international level, the *Manila Chronicle* praised those Americans who had offered to help the Shengs. *Hong Kong Standard* editor C.S. Kwei

wished that Sheng had picked another time for “the election,” given America’s struggles against Communist propaganda at that time.⁵

While reflecting upon America’s international quest to fight Communism, on February 19, 1952, the *San Francisco Chronicle*’s editorial staff decided to bring up the world-wide consequences of the “Southwood publicity.” Admitting that under “similar circumstances” many Americans “might yield to a temptation to go and do likewise,” they still declared: “Southwood has undone the long and tedious work of the Voice of America, of Radio Free Asia and even of American men who have been fighting in Korea.”⁶

San Francisco Chronicle columnist, Royce Brier, chimed in that word of this episode had now reached as far as Tibet. He challenged his Bay Area readers: “We are ...for freedom, but we are against it for somebody else if it is inconvenient for us.” Instead, he asserted: “...a free society cannot achieve its goal if this kind of prejudice is uncontrolled.”⁷

In San Mateo County, it was evident that *Redwood City Tribune* publisher Ray Spangler was deeply troubled by what was happening in South San Francisco, his “hometown.” On February 19, he admitted:

I fear that the majority here on the Peninsula lurk in the silence of long established racial prejudices. That’s an unsubstantiated opinion, but it comes from some experience.

However, for him the “Big Question” was: “By what right, in a nation of free and equal people, can any properties be restricted for the use of certain racial groups and denied to others? He then answered his question: “Apparently there is no such right under our Constitution.”⁸

That same day an editorial from the *Times/Tribune* clippings morgue (now at the San Mateo County History Museum) was headlined “Windfall for the Reds.” In a rather direct way, the writer said that the wrongs done to the Shengs had international repercussions:

Democracy took it on the chin in South



Sing Sheng addresses the crowd after the ballots were counted. The final vote was 174 against, 28 in favor of the family moving into the neighborhood. *San Mateo Times* Collection.

San Francisco Sunday. And the Russian newspapers and magazines picked up a propaganda item which they will use with great effect for many months to come.

About the homeowners:

...they have proclaimed themselves to the world as an intolerant group. They have provided the Communists with the most powerful propaganda weapon they have had in many months. In the world struggling for men's minds, the United States is striving desperately to win the friendship of the Chinese, the Indians and hundreds of millions of other yellow, brown and black skinned peoples. How can we expect them to believe in us and our democratic ideals when people living in a suburb of an

American city have shown themselves intolerant of this little family of Chinese, two members of which were born in the United States?

Sunday was a dark day on Southwood and a bright one for Russian propagandists.

On the evening of February 18, the South San Francisco City Council met for the first time since the media uproar had started. Bernard Taper was there to cover the proceedings. He noted 100 people were in attendance. Southwood residents were present. One explained: "I am not prejudiced, I just do not want to live with other races." A Southwood "housewife" felt it was suspicious that the whole drama was played out "on the eve of Brotherhood Week" and suspected Communists were responsible.

However, the pressure of negative international

attention motivated other South San Franciscans to speak out. Ted Pretzer, “head of the ‘Fighting Pretzer Family’ and a former commander of the city’s Veterans of Foreign Wars Post” asked: “Are we lowering an iron curtain within our own city?” He claimed: “The people of Southwood have...hurt the community and all America.” He then asked a second question: “How are the parents in Southwood going to explain this to their children?” One “school boy” accused the 174 who opposed Sheng as “made up of a bunch of Communists....”

City Attorney John Colebred read a letter from Alan Valentine from San Francisco’s Committee For Free Asia. Valentine concluded his written address to the City Council with: “...acts of discrimination like ... Sheng has encountered are giving the best possible ammunition to Communism in Asia.” Colebred then advised the Council that “restrictive covenants no longer have any validity.” The five-man Council concluded the discussion by voting unanimously “to condemn the action of the homeowners of Southwood....”

Two days later, on February 20, Taper wrote of a letter sent to the Sing Sheng Family from California Governor Earl Warren. In part, the state’s highest elected official said:

I am not at all proud of the action of people in the neighborhood...It is not in keeping with the fairness of the people of the San Francisco Bay Area....⁹

The Governor also mentioned that “it is just such things that Communists make much of in their effort to discredit our system.” Taper also quoted California’s United States Senator William Knowland as saying that this controversy “...will be put to the worst possible use by Communist propaganda in Asia.” Taper mentioned in this article that although the Sheng Family had by now received 65 offers of homes, because Grace was so close to her due date, the Shengs had elected to stay in Chinatown for the time being.

From the *Times/Tribune* clippings morgue, we

know that the religious communities of San Mateo County were meeting and adding their expressions of remorse for the ordeal of the Sheng Family. Under the February 20 headline “Church Leaders Join in Protest At ‘White Supremacy’ Vote,” it was reported that Reverend Ralph A. Benson, President of the Redwood City Ministerial Association and pastor of North Fair Oaks Community Church judged the action of the Southwood homeowners “definitely a slam at democracy.” Dr. Cecil G. Osborne of Burlingame’s First Baptist Church offered to take the Sheng Family in himself until a suitable house could be found. Reverend H.H. Larson of South San Francisco’s First Baptist Church announced his Sunday sermon was to be entitled “A Slap at Race Prejudice.” He added: “This year we are praying for China in our Church...and yet right under our own roof this devastating thing takes place.” Other Christian leaders who had similar things to say were John R. Wilkins, superintendent of the San Jose District of the Methodist Church who was a former pastor of Burlingame’s First Methodist Church, and South San Francisco Methodist reverends Robert N. Boswell, Romain Swedenburg and Andrew V. Juvinall. The Peninsula chapter of the Jewish B’nai B’rith called this a “challenge to all Americans who want love of democracy to be more than mere lip service.” The B’nai B’rith summed up its sad feeling that the Shengs:

...believed in democracy and hoped that the majority of their fellow men were like-minded. They submitted their case to the ballot – and lost.

In the February 21 editions of local newspapers, the tone of the affair took a nasty turn after reporters interviewed J.H. Denson, the man who wanted to sell the house in Southwood to the Shengs. Denson claimed that leading figures within the American Home Development Company had called him and explained: “...things really could go bad for me if I didn’t change my mind about the sale.” Denson reflected that this was not an open threat, “but I would call it open intimidation.” Denson recalled the developers

asking him if he'd read his deed, and if he realized that there were restrictions. Denson admitted he did not. Then, according to Denson, he was told "the whole neighborhood could bring suit against" his family, and that his service station business could be "black-balled." Denson also accused City Manager McClung of bullying his wife. Denson recounted that Mrs. Denson was distraught about all the bad feelings and called McClung for help, not realizing that he was a Southwood homeowner. McClung had Denson's wife "in tears" and told her: "We don't want Orientals west of the highway" (meaning El Camino Real).¹⁰

The same day that these revelations were being made, Bernard Taper issued an article headlined, "The Sheng Story: Scientific Study Shows Property Loses No Value When Races Mix."¹¹ He reported that the study that Ed Howden, of the San Francisco Council for Civic Unity, had spoken of, just before the garage vote on Sheng, was now completed. The investigation had been conducted by the University of California which had surveyed sample neighborhoods in San Francisco and Berkeley and found no correlation between higher property values and restricted neighborhoods.

The next night, at 8:00, a second meeting of the homeowners of Southwood was convened, and Sing Sheng was again invited (although it is not clear he attended). It was rumored that perhaps a new vote would take place.¹² From the morgue of the *Times/Tribune* of February 23, an article headlined "Turbulence Still Prevails at SSF Tract"¹³ appeared that gave a rather unseemly description of what had transpired. Some 200 persons had met at South San Francisco's Trinity Methodist Church,¹⁴ apparently at the request of the 28 who had voted to accept the Shengs. At the outset the press was ordered to the rear of the room so that faces of residents could not be photographed. It was a "bitter and disorderly" gathering. One in attendance shouted at the 28: "You are selling your neighbors down the river." When it was proposed that an apology be written to the Shengs, a man in the audience countered: "We'll accept His apologies." A statement from the majority



At the end of the "election" on February 1, 1952, Grace posed with Sing Sheng. She was due to give birth at the end of the month. *San Mateo Times* Collection.

was read which concluded:

Mr. Sheng requested an opinion. He received one.

No actual second vote took place. In an editorial the next day, the *San Francisco Examiner* noted that one of the homeowners had asked: "Wasn't Sheng familiar with the fact that there are daily listings in the real estate pages which provide properties for so-called minority groups?" The *Examiner* exclaimed: "What a question!" And answered: "These special listings for minority groups emphasize the segregation policy that reduces those peoples to the status of second-class citizens."¹⁵

The Sunday, February 24 edition of the *Chronicle* was filled with pieces about the Sheng/Southwood matter. Some of the nearly 300 letters to the editor were reprinted. The *Chronicle* noted that 266 supported Sheng while 16 were "on the other side." Bernard Taper

recounted the difficult meeting of two nights before, and the President of American Home Development was allowed several column inches to answer J.H. Denson's allegations. He denied pressuring Denson, but did say he supported restricted neighborhoods.

If Bay Area residents didn't have enough of the affair in their morning paper, that afternoon at 12:30, Edward R. Murrow, the highly regarded newscaster, featured the Sheng Family in his nation-wide telecast "See It Now," which appeared locally on KPIX. In a symbolic gesture focusing on the story, Murrow's cameras turned from Sheng to a shot of the Statue of Liberty. And if that still was not enough, at 6:30 p.m., Sheng was on national radio, stating "his case."¹⁶

In the next day's paper, Bernard Taper was still at it. This time his subject was Roger Roussille, a prominent Southwood resident who had chosen to break ranks with his neighbors. French-born Roussille, a detergent manufacturer, told reporters:

I do not want to go on living with a bunch of bigots.

I'm an American by choice. I can't take Americanism for granted the way some people do.

Roussille, a Catholic, and his wife, Jewish, were original owners. After he had announced that he was moving from Southwood, he said he received an anonymous call threatening him with a lawsuit if he sold his house to a "non-Caucasian." According to Taper: "Roussille said he told him to go right ahead and sue."

From the *Times/Tribune* morgue we know related stories kept appearing. On February 25, it was reported that Pastor Romain Swedenburg of the Buri Buri Community Methodist Church indicated that a dozen children from his Sunday School were withdrawn by their Southwood parents because he had protested the exclusion vote. In the same article Clinton White of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), while speaking in Oakland, was quoted as asserting: "The attitude of the Americans... who voted against the Shengs...contains more danger

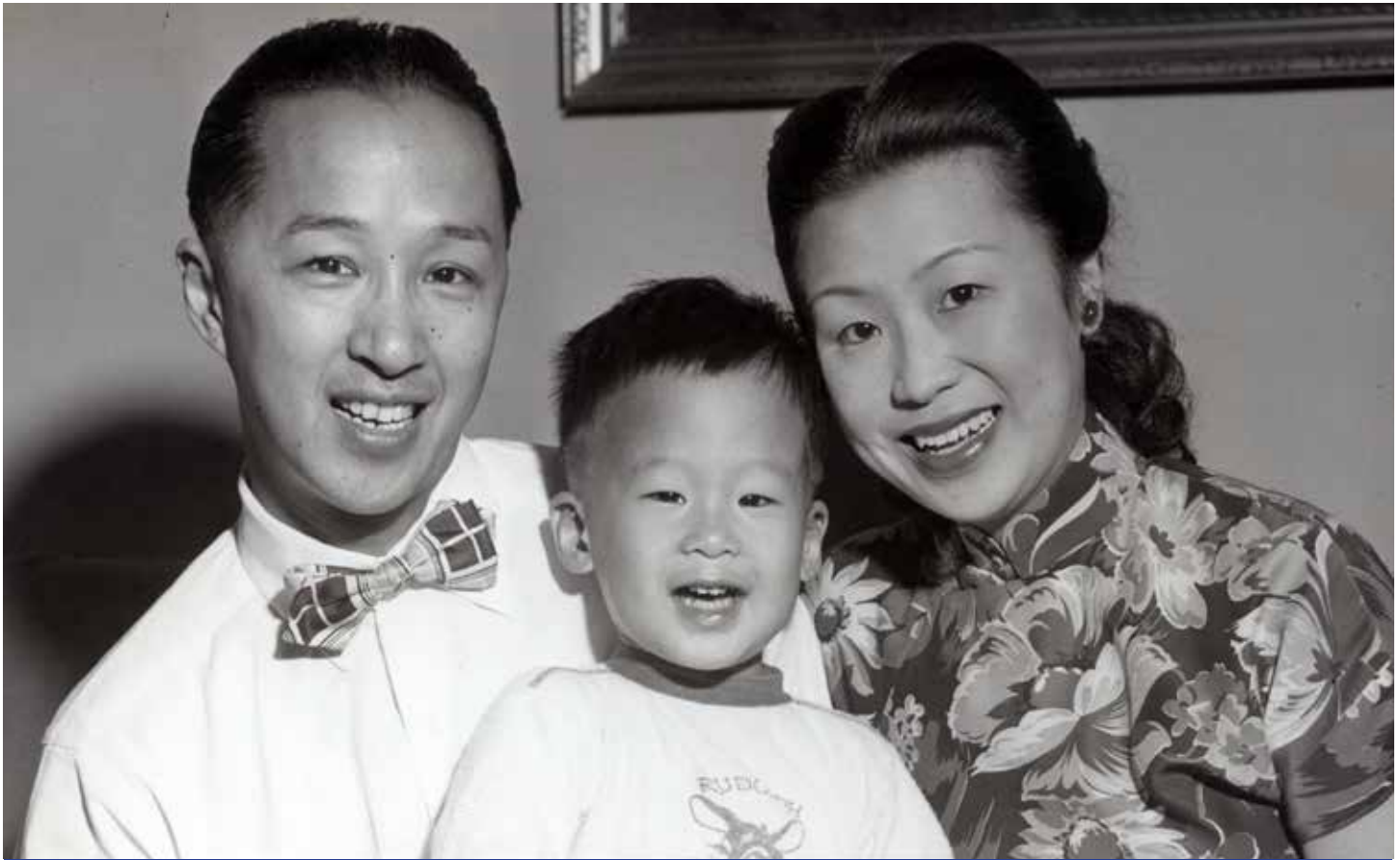
to our way of life than all the subversive influences in this country."¹⁷

By February 26, the *Chronicle's* editorial staff was ready to sum up the situation and put a positive spin on it:

...the cause of brotherhood actually is served by this incident...the explosive reaction in favor of the Shengs certainly indicates progress.¹⁸

On February 28, concerned citizens of the Peninsula met at the courthouse in Redwood City to hear several speakers on the matter. Elizabeth Eisenberg, Executive Director of the Council for Civic Unity, described how 20 neighborhoods in San Mateo County were at that time open to all races without effecting property values. The NAACP's Clinton White reflected how difficult it was to defend American principles in the realm of world of opinion. When episodes such as Southwood take place, he reasoned: "Communism advances."¹⁹

Putting this story into historical perspective, Ellen D. Wu, Ph.D., wrote an article for the *Pacific Historical Review* in 2008. In it she asserts that the Sheng experience, and similar episodes, helped improve housing opportunities for California's Asian people in advance of African Americans and Mexican Americans because of national, state and local concern with how Asians abroad, and within the United States, perceived the sincerity of claims of freedom in America.²⁰ With the Korean War and Cold War fully consuming America's attention, the need for the country's workings to not be judged as contrary to the nation's long established values was deemed essential in the struggle against Communism.



Robert and Julia Ting with their 2-year-old son, Christopher, in June 1954. *San Mateo Times* Collection.

Robert U.M. Ting Family

In 1951, Robert U.M. Ting (33 years old) and his wife Julia (31 years old) moved from Berkeley to Menlo Park. Like the Shengs, they would become involved in a racial dispute capturing national attention.

However, the first reference that can be found about them is a more ordinary, but joyous article in the *Times/Tribune* morgue from July 3, 1952. According to the story “Police Win Race – But Where Is Stork?,” the Tings received timely assistance from the Menlo Park Police Department and the California Highway Patrol. The couple was ready for the delivery of their first baby and needed to get from Menlo Park to Permanente Hospital in Oakland in a hurry. The drama began at 7:00 in the morning. An escort by the law enforcement agencies was arranged, and the Ting’s new boy,

Christopher, was born without a hitch.

Robert was a Shanghai-born, Stanford educated engineer.²¹ He enjoyed living in Menlo Park because it was also where he worked. His position was purchasing agent for Magna Engineering.²² The small family lived on Tehama Avenue.

Robert was a popular member of the community. In late 1953, when Dr. Harold Fenton began organizing a local Exchange Club, he asked Robert if he would become a charter member. The National Exchange Club leadership encouraged the organization of new chapters. No one locally was aware that because Robert was not white, that there might be a problem.²³

The National Exchange Club was founded in 1911 in Detroit, Michigan. By the 1950s, it operated as a service club similar to Rotary or Kiwanis. Its focus

included assistance to educators, agriculture, aviation, citizenship, commerce and industry, youth and geriatrics. Requirements for an individual to become a member included being a business or professional man and being white.

Dr. Fenton believed that National knew of Ting's race, but a few months after the Menlo Park Club began to function, National informed the locals of the restriction. Fenton's club chose to ignore the ugly communication until the spring of 1954, when National's regional secretary issued an ultimatum to either oust Ting or lose its charter.

An eerily similar set of circumstances to the Sheng experience developed, down to a United Press photo of the Tings, showing an attractive young couple and their two-year-old son, once more being unfairly persecuted because they were Chinese. The photo was captioned "Controversy Figures." The story inspired nation-wide attention as had the one before.

The National Exchange Club had created a sticky situation for itself. The July 26, 1954, issue of *Time Magazine* cited that its biggest membership state was California with 165 chapters. Now those clubs were in an "uproar over some ideas which national headquarters found unexchangeable."

The predicament for the National Exchange Club probably was exacerbated by some rather unfortunate comments made by National secretary, Harold Harter:

There is no more racial discrimination involved than there is in a Chinese family tong limiting its membership to Chinese.

The issue before Exchange Club members is not whether its restrictions constitute racial discrimination; they do. The issue is whether the members want to break down the restrictions....

On June 24, the Menlo Park club members met to determine what they ought to do. Ting offered to resign, but after a vote of 30 to 1, the men elected to disband rather than knuckle-in to the racist clause in National's Article of Incorporation.

Meanwhile a similar situation was developing in Stockton, California. According to *Time Magazine* the Exchange Club there had taken in Richard Wong, a San Francisco-born gift shop operator. Evidently, members in Stockton had asked Wong to join after hearing him make an inspiring speech about his wartime military experience as a United States liaison officer assigned to the Nationalist Chinese government. At the same time National was pressuring the Stockton group, the popular Wong was President of the local club!²⁴

Stockton followed Menlo Park and quit, and within a month, six other California clubs either disbanded, or were suspended by National for voicing support for their brother members in Menlo Park and Stockton. On July 15, 1954, 15 northern California clubs met in Oakland and debated whether to form a new club or take the issue to the National Convention. They voted to go to Louisville and make their case.

A September 16 article by Lawrence Malkin, of the Amsterdam, New York, *Evening Recorder*, clarified the growing national debate: "should private organizations which are not governed by anti-segregation laws – admit non-whites to membership?" For National Secretary Harold Harter at the Exchange Club's headquarters in Toledo, Ohio, the answer was to stick to the organization's constitution and not bend to the media blitz.

The 56-member Redwood City Club sent a resolution to National to be introduced at the convention set for October 6 through 11. It proposed a change in language for membership, from white, professional male to "any American citizen." The resolution was not acted upon. Within months, about 70 clubs quit or were dropped from the national organization.

Today the National Exchange Club still exists. At the time of the Ting incident it had 100,000 members. Today it is 21,000 strong.

Happily, the Ting story does not end here. In the *Times/Tribune* morgue file for March 26, 1955, can be found in article headlined "Race Hassle Figure Gets U.S. Citizenship." The day before Ting had been sworn

in as an American Citizen at the county courthouse in Redwood City.

Ting was quoted in the story:

It is a great honor, a wonderful privilege. I also feel it is a big responsibility. I plan to exercise my responsibility by not only voting, but voting intelligently and by showing that Americans are a real democratic people.



In 1954, Robert Ting was a purchasing agent for Magna Engineering in Menlo Park. *San Mateo Times* Collection.

Endnotes

- ¹ "Neighbors Vote to Decide If Chinese Can Keep Home," *Times/Tribune* clippings morgue at the San Mateo County History Museum, February 15, 1952.
- ² Bernard Taper, "South S.F. Area Votes to Exclude a Chinese Family," *San Francisco Chronicle*, February 17, 1952.
- ³ Monuments Men Foundation, webpage, www.monumentsmenfoundation.org, accessed May 5, 2015.
- ⁴ Bernard Taper, "Homes Are Offered to Excluded Chinese," *San Francisco Chronicle*, February 18, 1952.
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- ⁶ "Southwood to the World," Editorial, *San Francisco Chronicle*, February 19, 1952.
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Mable Leong in the green house at Ah Sam, August 1982. Photo by Susan Gilbert, courtesy of the Leong Family.