



History

From Gold Mountain to Orange Farm: How the Chinese Shaped California's Citrus Industry

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by Ed Fuentes

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Chinese field workers washing and packing citrus at Riverside's Whipple Ranch, circa 1886 |
Photo courtesy of the Riverside Metropolitan Museum, Riverside CA)

This part two in a series about Riverside's Chinatown. Read part one [here](#).

As a city and county landmark, a State Point of Historical Interest, and by being listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the empty lot that was once Chinatown is part of the larger Chinese immigration story.

When news that gold was discovered in California, it reached the Guangdong Province where locals began to refer to the soon-to-be state as gam saan, or "gold mountain." Chinese immigrated to California in large numbers, soon facing laws that kept them from mining gold. But there were still the railroads, or other service oriented labor, like farming, to keep the promise of gam saan alive.

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That included the rail junction of San Bernardino, where Chinese laborers were attracted by the agricultural towns of Riverside, Redlands, Ontario and Cucamonga. By the late 1800s, each city had a Chinese enclave supplying labor or services.

They were also supplying ideas, says Dr. Margie Akin, a retired anthropologist and Save Our Chinatown Committee member. If it were not for their farming experience, mostly from oranges being indigenous to China, there may not have been a citrus industry, she says.

"Riverside was started by gentlemen farmers, led by John North, with the intention to build an agricultural-based industry," Akin explains. "Many crops were attempted, but the colonists did not have very much success."

"Chinese farmers brought a knowledge on how to pick and pack oranges and lemons," including the technique of protecting produce with paper, notes Akin. The Chinese wrap allowed citrus to be shipped with limited damage in the days before refrigerated box cars.

"I think they were most responsible for the knowledge to grow citrus," concurs Kevin Hallaran, the city historian at the Riverside Metropolitan Museum. "The Chinese that came from the same province, many were farmers."



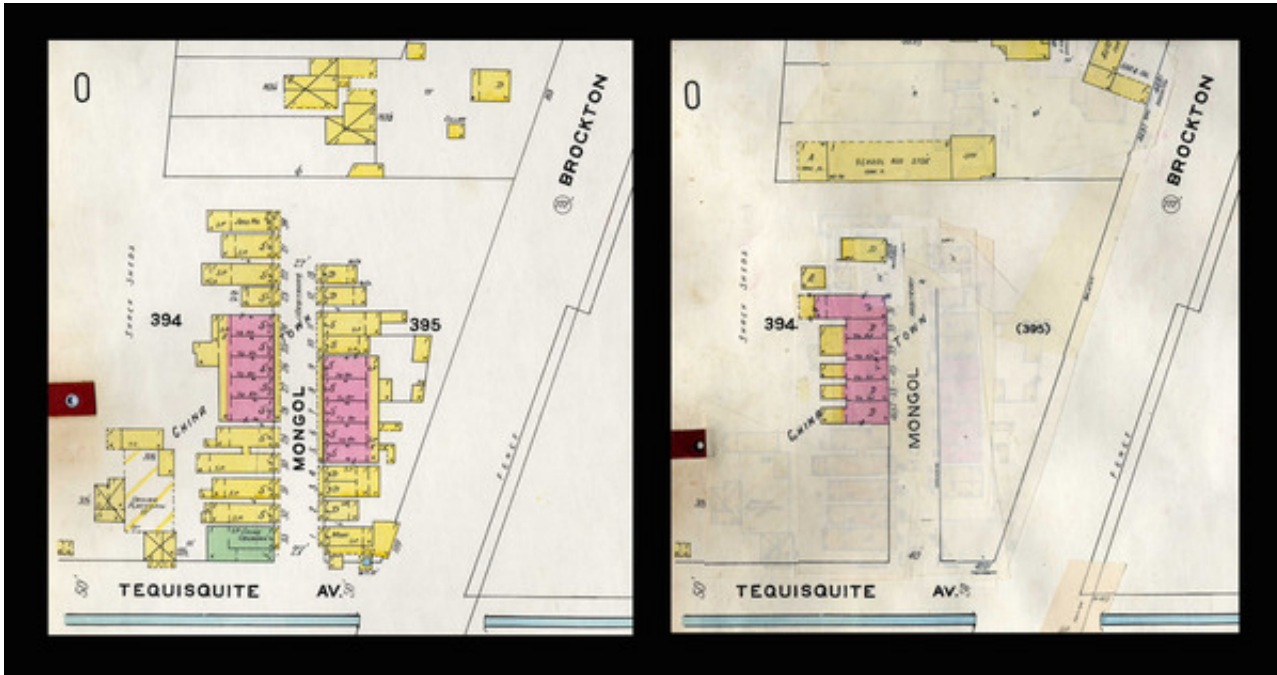
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A 1912 hand tinted photo showing Chinatown from Mt. Rubidoux. Brockton Ave runs left to right, where it intersects with Tequesquite Ave (Courtesy of the Riverside Metropolitan Museum)

The Lost Chinese Inland Empires

Riverside's first Chinatown grew with the city, then forced by laundry ordinances to move from the center of Downtown to the outskirts. In 1885, the new Chinatown was founded in a large sloping gully leading into the Santa Ana River.

In July 1893, a kitchen stove fire swept through the enclaves' wood buildings. Chinese residents rebuilt the town, tossing discarded and unrecoverable items into a trash pit that was covered with the last set of new buildings.



SanbornMaps.jpg

Sanborn Maps shows Riverside's diminishing Chinatown.

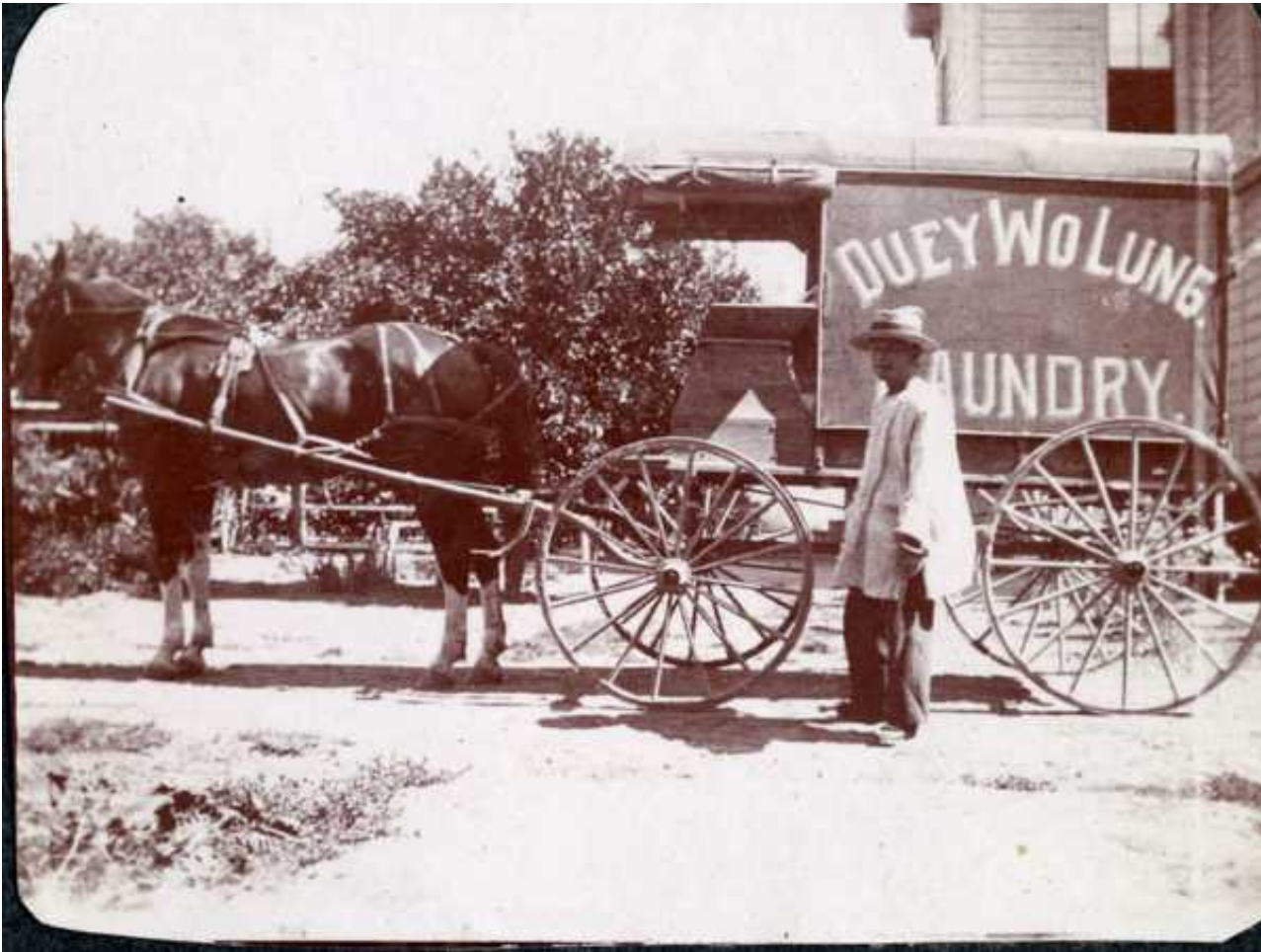
The population of 400 swelled to 4,000 during seasonal harvests, but the growth of the rural colony was stymied due to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, a racist policy that forbade Chinese men from marrying Caucasian women. By the early 20th century, the population of rural Chinatowns around the state lost residents due to old age and restrictive immigration policies.

Riverside's Chinatown, at one time covering over 6 acres, saw its residents move away. The last store was shuttered in 1938. The last resident of Chinatown, George Wong, died a bachelor in 1974.

The remaining property, which sits as an empty field today, was purchased from Wong's estate by a development firm, then purchased in 1980 by the Office of the Riverside County Superintendent of Schools, which originally intended to make the land that once was home to Chinese in Riverside meaningful.

Now it is the last reminder of Chinese workers in the Inland Empire. In 2001, San Bernardino's former Chinatown was excavated before a Caltrans building was built on the site. Redlands had a site that was once a small Chinese colony--it is now under a multiplex theater. Chinese laborers in Rancho Cucamonga lived together in China House, long abandoned, and there is no interest from that city to restore it.

On the surface, it appears Chinese-Americans want to save the history of some of those who came to Riverside to work in the fields. If you dig deeper, those same preservationists are really guiding a way for all the inland cities of the Citrus Belt to preserve their own history as well.



Chen Duey began operating his laundry business in 1878 with Chen Duey Wong Nim and Wong Gee. Within a few years, Duey was Riverside Chinatown's spokesman and unofficial mayor. (Courtesy of the Riverside Metropolitan Museum, Riverside CA)