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Keep Locke Weird

By Alexander Nazaryan / May 1, 2014 12:29 PM EDT

“**I** believe in the *real* world,” Thomas Herzog growls dismissively through his white beard in response to my asking whether his book/antique store, Strange Cargo, has a fiction section. Funny thing, because confrontations with reality are otherwise rare here in Locke, Calif., a dust mote of a town about 30 miles south of Sacramento that has spent decades resisting encroachments from the modern world. A hundred miles away, in Silicon Valley, bright young things are pioneering ever more fanciful ways for humans to connect and share. In Locke, you connect at Al the Wop’s, the only bar in town, and share what you will over Bud Light and steak slathered in peanut butter (it’s a tradition started in the 1940s, rarely questioned and widely beloved).

Founded in 1915, Locke is the only town in the United States built by the Chinese for the Chinese, rising at a time when “Yellow Peril” laws heavily restricted the basic rights of immigrants from Asia. All over America, urban Chinatowns are a reminder of that unfortunate era: You can eat the same dumplings, or buy the same dragon-adorned trinkets, in Boston, Washington and Oakland. Atlanta has a Chinatown. *Atlanta!* These were all ghettos then, and they are all ghettos now, even if the segregation today is enforced by custom, not by law. No number of stress balls or barbecued rabbits can obscure the struggle and sadness of these places.

Locke isn't rich, and it sure as hell isn't glamorous. But it is indubitably genuine, never more so than when the California sun is at its apogee, scorching the surrounding farmland and turning the Sacramento River into a ribbon of slow-burning fire. The Chinese came here in the mid-19th century to build the railroads, then stayed to raise levees along the Sacramento River, taking a quarter-million acres of land back from the water. Having completed nation-building projects both riparian and locomotive, the supposedly seditious Chinese took up farming.

Many of the Chinese laborers settled in a town called Walnut Grove. After the Chinese section there burned down in 1915, they went to landowner George Locke and asked if they could expand on a minuscule settlement called Lockeport. The homeless Chinese of Walnut Grove (today, pop: 1,500) were prevented from buying the land outright by the state's Alien Land Act, passed in 1913. Locke agreed to the sale, and Locke was born. According to the book *Locke and the Sacramento Delta Chinatowns*, "The Chinese called the town 'Lockee,' which means happy living."

The settlement quickly developed a propensity for sin: Locke was full of men whose families, if they had any, were back in China. A "wild vitality" marked Locke's first decades, writes James Motlow in *Bitter Melon*, an oral history of the town. There were, apparently, five whorehouses "and several speakeasies during Prohibition. There was no law enforcement in Locke, white or otherwise." Yet former residents appear to agree that the drinking, gambling and prostitution did not necessarily make Locke a dangerous or unpleasant place to live.

The end of Prohibition spelled the end of Locke's prosperity. According to the National Park Service, "The asparagus industry declined, and increased mechanization began to reduce the need for unskilled farm labor."

Today, the speakeasies and whorehouses are gone, and not much else remains. To be fair, not much else was there in the first place. For about a decade now, publications have listed the Chinese population here at about 10 people, but I suspect it is

half that, since time moves quicker than statisticians. There are fewer than 100 people in this town of two streets, a nigh-invisible waypoint between Sacramento and the Bay Area. The residents of Locke are loners and romantics, farm workers and historians. They want mostly to be left alone, to live in their antiquated California fantasy that has somehow hopscotched from the 19th century right into the 21st. They know that the adventuresome tourists from San Francisco, easily identified by make of car, could be their salvation. Then again, those same tourists could be their doom, Instagramming this curiosity right into extinction.

Locke has been dying for so long, it might actually survive. Calvin Trillin came here for *The New Yorker* in 1978, noting that, with its wooden structures that look like drunks preparing to topple over into Main Street, “Locke could apparently serve as a museum of building-code violations.” Little would dissuade him from rendering much the same verdict today.

Leather-clad bikers begin to congregate at Al’s long before the sun is over the yardarm. One of them was named George; he did not give his last name because, in Locke, if they don’t already know your last name, they probably shouldn’t. George had stopped while riding from San Jose back to Sacramento. He was dressed in sleek leather, while his bike, orange and blue, reposed outside. In his glass, bourbon had mingled with ice, turning his drink the color of tanned skin.

Locke was always “pretty much like this,” says George, who has been coming here for 30 years. “The buildings across the street were leaning.” Some in town would like to see the buildings lean a little less, to attract new businesses and tourists. Others think that the tourists are coming precisely to see the leaning buildings and the empty streets.

Also at Al's was John Greene, who flies a crop duster and has a wrinkled, smiling face that seems quintessentially Californian. Greene is a fiddler who studied with the great postwar composer Morton Feldman at the State University of New York at Buffalo. Though most people live behind Main Street, Greene lives on it, in a house whose stove is inlaid with two rusted woks that look like ancient satellite dishes pointed at dying stars. Upstairs, he shows me small rooms, most of them empty, that he says constituted a bustling opium den. Greene sleeps on a mattress on the floor. His dog is loud and small.

“It’s a working town,” he says. “A working-class town.” He adds that a “certain faction” of Locke has been “pandering to the tourism.” Greene has thought about pandering to tourism, too: “A little start-up brewery would be nice,” he muses. His building, in fact, has a beautiful bar on its ground floor, long and absinthe-colored. But the time-space continuum works strange tricks on Locke—or maybe no tricks at all. For at least four decades, this town has dreamt of improvement. And yet it always wakes into the harsh light of 1915.

Still, change is snaking down from Sacramento along Interstate 5. Nobody yet knows whether that change will ultimately turn Locke into a lower-elevation sibling of Bodie, the kind-of-famous ghost town in the Sierra Nevadas, or a hip little enclave on the order of, say, Occidental in Sonoma County, where decrepitude has been deftly alchemized into charm. Whether the various real estate/business interests of Locke are holding the city back or preserving it is a matter that’s as dusky as the alleyways between the wooden buildings here.

The problem largely arises from the fact that the residents of Locke did not own the land they lived on, because the 1913 California law prohibited it. That law finally passed into oblivion in 1952; 15 years later, investors from Hong Kong bought the town and adjoining land for \$700,000. Though the town was granted National Historic Landmark designation in 1990, the state government could not perform repairs on the town’s infrastructure because all the land was in private hands. The investors finally sold 10 acres in the middle of Locke to the Sacramento Housing and Redevelopment Agency in 2001, and

some basic enhancements were made, including sprinklers and a sewer upgrade. And a homeowners' group was installed to supervise the buying and selling of properties, with an eye to giving the descendants of the original Chinese settlers the right of first refusal on any properties put on the market.

All this has turned Locke into a cauldron of competing interests, many of them pivoting around the issue of race. Some think the whole town should be left as a monument to the racism Chinese workers faced in the first half of the 20th century, while others find it racist that Chinese-American buyers today are given preference in homeownership. There have been lawsuits, allegations of unconstitutional behavior and wistful allusions to Robert's Rules of Order, these battles often waged over parcels of land worth less than a square millimeter of Manhattan.

Paradoxically, this inertia may be Locke's savior, a sort of amber that preserves this place against stores that sell T-shirts declaring "Keep Locke Weird." Other than Al the Wop's and Locke Garden, the town has few amenities that might suit your average Yelp-toting tourist. Some stores are closed when they shouldn't be, making the town feel more deserted than it actually is. But what it lacks in commerce, the town makes up for in culture: Its four museums must make Locke the most museum-rich municipality, per capita, in the United States. These include the Locke Boarding House Museum, which is administered by the state; the Chinese Association Museum; and the Locke Chinese School Museum, a one-room schoolhouse founded in 1926. Best of all is the Dai Loy Museum, a gambling house that seems to have been utterly untouched since closing in the 1950s. A crepuscular chamber of gambling tables and brandy bottles, it looks less like a remnant of reality than a movie set intricately constructed (in fact, a scene from the recent *On the Road* was filmed here, as was a

portion of Clint Eastwood's movie about Charlie Parker, *Bird*; Eastwood apparently visits Al's once in a while). None of the museums is ever manned by a docent, it seems. You simply wander in and out as if through a time warp.

You can also repose in a neatly manicured memorial park, watching the cars pass: a flatbed out of *The Grapes of Wrath*, followed by a Prius. Or else wander down less-trafficked byways off Main Street, where most residents live. Here, the mystery of Locke dissipates, and the vulnerability of Locke becomes apparent. This is a small town, poor, where life has been hard for just about a century.

Justin Cairns and Julie Minor both tell me they are archaeologists, presumably of the amateur kind. They are both young, and they both live on Main Street. He has been here about a year. She left her husband, who would not move here with her. This seems like a petty reason to break up a marriage, but such is her love of Locke.

Cairns is enormously knowledgeable about the byzantine land disputes of Locke, a place he calls "the most political small town" around. He says his reasons for living here are very simple ("cheap rent"), though I suspect there is more to it than that.

Minor is more outwardly romantic about this strange little town, a dusty strip of California history, a stubborn rejoinder to all things new. "It's not pretentious," she says. "Not yet."

Community Guidelines