

# Locke: A ghost town in the Sacramento River Delta, California

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The unique little town of Locke is located in the Sacramento River Delta. It is the only historic village of its kind in the United States

-- built by Chinese merchants, for Chinese immigrants.



The settlement was established when a fire destroyed the Chinese section of the neighboring town of Walnut Grove. Rather than rebuild in the same area, a group of prominent Chinese merchants financed and constructed a new town about a half-mile south of Walnut Grove, on land leased from George Locke.

The investors had ample money to buy land, but in 1915, California law prohibited Chinese immigrants from owning real estate. The oppressive law was declared unconstitutional in 1952.

Locke has always been little more than a wide spot in the road. The tiny community has only two streets. The commercial center of Locke is a few blocks long, and located on Main Street. The residential area parallels Main Street on Key Street.

In 1920, the town looked pretty much like it does today, but it had more residents. About 630 Chinese immigrants occupied Key Street and the second floor apartments above the handful

of buildings on Main Street. The number of inhabitants began to decrease shortly after the end of WWII.

By 1950, the population was down to 400, and at present there are approximately 100 residents, -a dozen or so having Chinese ancestry. Locke has become a virtual ghost town.

Today, the narrow main street of Locke has a unique charm not found in other historic towns. The paint- worn wooden buildings are original, and connected by a patchwork of wooden and lumpy cement walkways.



Some of the extremely tired buildings are propped up, some are leaning into the street, - most are structurally challenged, but all convey a strong sense of early Chinese American history.

The Main Street storefronts are mostly empty except for a few curio shops, a bar and restaurant, and a small general store. You can peek into the windows of the long vacant buildings, and use your imagination and the dusty furnishings, to conjure up images of the little businesses that have occupied the space over the last century



On the same street you will find the original single-room Chinese schoolhouse, -always open to the public, and the Dai Loy Gambling house, one of the oldest buildings that was the social center of town until 1950. It is now a makeshift museum for tourists, and well worth the small price of admission.

The one-way Main Street offers limited parking, especially in front of "Al's Place," a fun hangout that draws an interesting clientele. Established in the 30s, and popularly known as "Al the Wops," this locally famous bar and restaurant was the only non-Chinese business in town for many years.



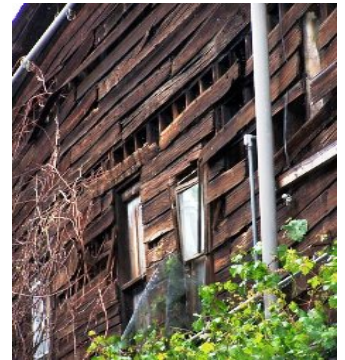
You cannot walk the tiny center street of Locke without being transported to an earlier time. Close your eyes and visualize the quiet past. Imagine the street full of colorful red paper lanterns swaying in a warm summer night's breeze. Listen to the muted laughter from the now empty apartment windows, and smell the incense and multitude of food fragrances of the Orient. Even today, voices seem further away than distance would suggest.

Everything about Locke is old, and odd, but visitors would not have it any other way.

Our fear is that the Locke we cherish will eventually succumb to concerns about tourist safety, or to building codes, or perhaps (God forbid) be destroyed by fire, like so many other wooden towns of the past.

Locke is an easy one and one half hour drive from San Francisco. Click **here** for a Google map.

The charming all-wooden hamlet has managed to remain relatively unchanged for almost 100 years. Make a point to see it while you can.



Happy travels.

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