

## News

### LOCKE DUSTS OFF FORGOTTEN HISTORY VISITOR CENTER COMMEMORATES IMMIGRANTS

By **Jennifer Torres**

October 11, 2008

Record Staff Writer

LOCKE - At one end of this creaky but still living Delta community is the Locke Garden Restaurant, built in the early 1900s and bought a few years ago by Ivan and Catherine Zhang, who handle orders as their children study in the dining room after school.

At the other end of town - a short walk past a grocery, a ramshackle, one-time theater and a museum that used to be a gambling hall - is an old boardinghouse, Sam's Rooms, newly restored with a California State Park sign planted in front.

At 11 a.m. today, the building, which once housed farm and levee workers in the historic Chinese settlement, will officially reopen as a visitor and cultural center, commemorating the contributions and experiences of immigrants who settled the Delta.

The ceremony, celebrating the \$2.4 million renovation of the boardinghouse, is to include a parade of Chinese performers, a fundraising lunch and guided tours.

It also represents the accomplishment of long-sought civic improvement and optimism for rejuvenation in a place that history and economics had left struggling in disrepair.

"There's history here, but not everybody knows the history," said Catherine Zhang, who moved her family to Locke from San Francisco in 2000.

Zhang was born in the same Chungshan District town as many of the immigrants who founded Locke in the early 20th century.

In 1915, after Walnut Grove's Chinatown burned down, former residents negotiated with landowner George Locke to build a settlement on his property in Sacramento County about 25 minutes north of Stockton.

At its height, Locke was home to about 600 residents and as many as 1,000 seasonal workers. Today, about 80 people live there. Ten are Chinese.

"It's always a puzzling concern," said Clarence Chu, chairman of the Locke Management Association, which oversees the community. "When all the families moved away, what would happen to the history and the culture?"

What happened to the families' homes and buildings also was a concern.

Under the 1913 Alien Land Act, the Chinese immigrants who settled Locke couldn't buy the land they lived on, and because they didn't hold titles, they couldn't get loans to improve their stores and houses. The state Supreme Court in 1952 struck down that law as unconstitutional.

But ownership of Locke's land didn't change hands until Chu's family bought it in the late 1970s with plans for rehabilitation.

Because they didn't own the buildings, though, those plans stalled, too.

By the late 1990s, the community was threatened with outright condemnation because of its failing sewage infrastructure.

Finally, Chu's family arranged to sell the land to the Sacramento Housing and Redevelopment Agency, which secured government grant money to repair the sewer system before eventually allowing owners to buy the parcels of land their buildings sat on.

The Locke Boarding House project is a collaboration of the state Department of Parks and Recreation, the housing agency and the Locke Management Association.

"It's been a great experience having one building being fixed up really well," said cabinet-maker Russell Ooms, who has kept a residence in Locke since 1973. Other large-scale improvements, he said, have been difficult. "The problem is, the people here are generally poor."

The community is a mix of remaining Chinese residents, artists and artisans such as Ooms, and Latino migrant workers.

Ooms bought another of Locke's former boardinghouses, knocked out its interior walls and turned it into his home. His shop is in a former flour mill, and he is working to renovate an old church.

"I love this little town," he said. "It's quiet. It's dark at night."

He said he hopes the boardinghouse project is a step toward ongoing renovation.

Chu said he believes it will be and that Locke's challenge in the future will be to retain what makes it historically significant, even as it progresses.

"This is a unique place," he said, "where we have the combination of being a historical landmark as well as a living community."

Contact reporter Jennifer Torres at (209) 546-8252 or [jtorres@recordnet.com](mailto:jtorres@recordnet.com).

[VISIT HER BLOG](#)