

## Locke: America's Last Rural Chinese Town

"Cultural Geography" with Professor Clarence Glacken was one of the best classes that I took when I was an undergraduate at the University of California at Berkeley. Another outstanding—and fun—class was the "Geography of California" with Professor James Parsons. In addition to attending lectures, his students were taken on field trips to geographically interesting parts of the San Francisco Bay Area. I credit my background in geography with helping me while working to be a leader and teaching an effective college class on organizational behavior.

Early this spring, I met a professor of cultural geography at a friend's soirée. We talked about our shared interests until another man who had overheard our conversation joined in and urged me to visit Locke when I was next in California. He spoke so passionately about 'America's last rural Chinese town' that the next time I went West, I made a side trip to Locke.

Locke is located 30 miles south of Sacramento in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta region in Northern California, a beautiful matrix of waterways on which are large cargo ships and docks for house and speed boats. I drove south from the state capital on Highway 5, a superhighway, and then turned off onto Twin Cities Road, a small county road that took me past acres of farmland, until I ran out of road and turned onto California Highway 160 which took me along a river.

When I saw the sign for Locke, I turned off the road and got a surprise when I drove down Main Street of what looked like a two-street town. My surprise was that the only people I saw were older white men standing in front of small shops housed in two-story well-worn wooden buildings.

At the end of the street, I still wasn't certain if I wanted to get out of my car. But I had come this far so I made a loop back, parked my car in the visitors' parking lot, and looked up to see the "Visitors' Center" sign on what I learned was the Locke Boarding House Visitors' Center.

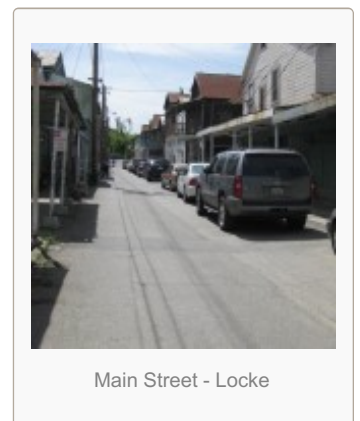
Anita, a volunteer at the center, became my guide to the history and geography of Locke. The history is best told by quoting from the Locke Foundation's flyer. "Established in 1915, Locke is the only existing town in America built and inhabited almost exclusively by Chinese until recent years. During its heyday from the 1920s to 1940s, Locke was an autonomous island of Chinese culture with a permanent population of 600, including many families, and a seasonal farm labor population of an additional thousand."

Since I was on my way to visit my niece in the Gold Country, I asked Anita about the role of the Chinese of Locke with the Chinese railroad workers and miners who were uniting the country and panning for gold in the mid-1800's. She told me that after the gold rush ebbed, the Chinese moved on to find employment as migrant workers. "Locke is the legacy of the extraordinary efforts made by the Chinese in developing agriculture in California," states the brochure. The building we were in was recently renovated to restore the look and feel of the boarding house for the Chinese who came to work in the fields.

In 1970, Locke was placed on the Registry of National Historic Places. Only 90 or so residents still live in the town and only about twelve are Chinese. Anita, who commutes to job as a volunteer, told me that the children moved or to big cities to go to college and find good jobs. They wanted their parents and grandparents to be near there so more and more Chinese families picked up roots and left. However, the Locke Chinese School, a language school established in 1926, is in the process of being renovated through funds donated by patrons in China and also locally.



Anita at the Locke Visitors' Center



Main Street - Locke

After buying a Locke t-shirt and making a small donation, I said thank you to Anita and walked down Main Street to look in the stores. I stopped when I came across an open area with a black structure. The Locke Memorial Park and Monument is “Dedicated to the Chinese who built the railroad, levees, and agriculture of California and the town of Locke.” It is a lovely, peaceful place to contemplate the history of the area and the legacy left by those who lived in Locke.

Clarence K. Chu owns the Locke Art Center and I met him when I went into his store to look for postcards and browse any items that caught my eye. Clarence shared with me that he commuted the 30 miles from Sacramento to be at his store and support the town of Locke. He, like Anita, is aware of the drastic budget cuts being made in the state; however, both dedicated volunteers are hoping that more funds will be available for the town to be updated.

Along with some postcards, one of my purchases was the book, *Bitter Melon: Inside America's Last Rural Chinese Town* by Jeff Gillenkirk and James Motlow. It is a lovely and poignant book detailing the significance of Locke in Chinese American history told through the stories of those who lived in Locke.

Locke “has withstood the threat of fire and floods, the pain of poverty, discrimination, and neglect, and abandonment by most of its original residents and offspring.” Yet, Locke continues to exist and to remind others about its history.

Other items I bought from Clarence were an individual Chinese tea pot and small plates in the same pattern that I had acquired shortly after my college graduation. Driving away from Locke, I felt that I had selected wonderful ‘memories’ that would remind me of a most enjoyable and educational cultural geography field trip.



Chinese School is Being Restored



Locke Memorial Park and Monument