

# Locke Foundation Newsletter 樂居鎮基金會

Preserving Locke's history and legacy

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Winter 2018

www.locke-foundation.org

## Locke Foundation Fundraiser October 28, 2017



### Clockwise:

1. Locke residents table.
2. Event committee: Eileen Leung, Stuart Walthall, Anita Lo
3. Raffle prize winners: Sylvia Sun Minnick, Jim Chong, Teyo, and Kim Rabon.. Photos courtesy of Kelvin Yue.
4. Sacramento Camellia Lions Club members present donation to Locke Foundation: Vicki Beaton, Jenny Fong, Stuart Walthall, Kim Yuen and Helen Yee.

Other photos courtesy of Joe Chan. Additional photos may be found on LF web site.

# Once Upon a Chinese Town: A Place in Time

By Corliss S. Lee



Corliss Suen Lee is a former resident of Locke and Walnut Grove. She shares her story of growing up in the Chinese community in the Delta with Locke Foundation. Her parents were Robert and Louise Suen. She graduated from Delta High School and Santa Clara University. She currently resides in the East Bay where she is a successful real estate developer.

Locke conjures up thoughts of Chinese people living in a microcosm in the middle of open farmland and a meandering river with a thousand miles of waterways. It was a town built on land they could not own. It was constructed solely for the Chinese by white workers. It is the only town of this type left in America. Different than a "Chinatown" that is an offshoot of a larger city, Locke's ad hoc structure sets the stage where they can live their lives in order and harmony.

**It was a way of life, morphed into its own particular Chinese town character.**

Locke's current dilapidation and silence belies the years past of the hustle and commotion of this vibrant town. In silence as I walk the street today, I can remember the smell of dust and sweat of the farmers coming home. I can smell stir fry, deep fry and boiling soup. Fish, chicken and vegetables in abundance. Some families have their own gardens in the back of town and shared the fruits of their labor. Fishermen share their abundant catch of the day.

I would come home from school to find a bag of fresh fish on the inside of the screen door.

Close my eyes and I can hear some sing song sounds of voices in conversation, of clanging cooking utensils, of gambling. I can hear constant noises that in it's complexity become a hymn of life.

Just as other families have shared their stories, I am thoughtfully willing to be a part of Locke's and of America's diverse history.

**There were many single men who dreamed of making it rich to return to a better life in China.**

My Uncle Soon struggled all his life to go home to China, finally making it back in ashes.

**And we took care of our own.**

I'm playing on the unpaved street in front of Moon Café. A homeless man, Mun Doe, lifts the lid of a garbage can next to me. I'm mesmerized by what I see. There is a complete plate of food with a banana on top. I must have stared too long for he offers me his banana. I am 5 or 6 years old.

What wonderful lessons I learn that day. First my "Auntie" Chow provides food for him. And to

ensure his pride is in tact, it is never given to him as a handout. She places it neatly in the garbage. Second as bereft as he is, he still shares his food with me. .

**My father, Robert, came from China through Angel Island in the 1920s.**

As a paper son his last name is Shui. He starts out the son of one "father". Later when he is offered amnesty in the mid 50s he becomes the son of his real father and his last name becomes Suen. I start school with one last name and end the school year with a different one. Coming from a family that has no economic worries, he sees life in Locke as a fun adventure. One of the first thing he did was buy an Indian motorcycle. He also learned English rather quickly. He is charismatic, creative and fun.



**My mother, Louise, was born on a farm in 1913.**

My mother was born on a farm next to Courtland (another small Chinatown on the Delta). She moves with her parents and 11 siblings to Locke in the late 1910s. For a time she works in the pear shed for 10 cents a box.

**Mom being independent and head strong saves herself from abuse.**

Her father arranges for my mom to marry an old friend of his. She tells him if he likes his friend so much, he should marry him.

**She and dad marry on Augusts 26, 1930.**

She is the beautiful and he is the swashbuckler.

**With his parents they opened Lim Kee's in Locke. It included a pool table and slot machines.**

One day there is a Filipino man playing pool. As my mother walks by, he whispers something to her. She immediately grabs a pool stick and chases the man out the door and down the street.



**Louise becomes a successful business woman.**

Although from a very meager family, mom becomes a very shrewd woman with a sense of style. She takes over the helm of running the department store, then in Walnut Grove.

Mom decides to break the barrier of catering to the Chinese alone. The farm workers become in-



creasingly Mexican. Mom caters to the new workers. The workers come over with the shirt on their backs wearing old leather sandals on their feet.

The smell of human sweat and dirt wafts heavily throughout the store. Mom only lets in 15 men at a time. She makes the rest wait in the back of a large truck outside.



The white farm owner wants each Mexican worker to have a complete work outfit. She sells Dickie's Shirts and Levi jeans. (During the war, clothing was hard to come by, but my parents are able to get the merchandise).

Their feet are rough, cracked and crusted. I put on socks and shoes holding my breath, trying unsuccessfully not to touch their feet. I am twelve.

**Louise had another great idea. She created a new department for all the woman in the vicinity.**



She goes to the San Francisco Mart and picks out clothing by size and style. She knows her customers well. Her business flourishes.

At Christmas, the husband asks mom to pick out a present for his wife. He says that what she selected in the past was perfect. Mom calls his wife. "Your husband just called."

His wife comes in. She picks an outfit. Mom alters it to fit perfectly. Mom wraps it up and calls the husband and he picks it up. Fun.

**In its heyday, farming was the salvation for the Chinese. Labor contractors were usually merchants. In essence they provide labor to the ranches and farms own by the whites.**

Dad gets a management job from the white land owner. The man he replaces challenges him to a showdown at noon. Dad gets a gun permit. It is in Suisun City. He waits. Minutes go by, then hours. His challenger never shows.

At 11 pm Mom and Grandma cry. They just know dad has died. It's been so long and he has not come home.

Then they hear noises so late at night. It's dad.

Finally home.

"Where have you been? Why are you so late", in relief they ask.

"I went to hunt him down."

**Gambling was illegal**

Chinese consider it a great pastime melding luck, technique and great camaraderie. One manager weaves his magic with the authorities and politicians to keep the doors open.

Walnut Grove, Dad manages a gambling house. The politicians come, i.e. the county supervisor, to our house. Especially during election time they seek my fathers support. Dad also developed a working relationship with the newly elected Sheriff. Dad makes it worthwhile for them to support him.

Dad answers the phone. "Hello. Ok. I'll leave town by 10 am tomorrow". The next day Dad leaves. My sister sits in back of the pickup truck. She watches the men running out of the building. Some jump from the second floor. The new Sheriff perfunctorily cracks down on the illegal activity.

In 1971, my father was approached by a successful Chinese restaurateur. My father tells his buddy not to open the old gambling hall. Times had changed.

Dad gets a call to leave town...again. His buddy gets arrested and the gambling hall shuts down.

**My grandmother told me that she never felt any racial tension.**

Of course her life is lived in the safe haven of this town with a grocery store, post office, church, department store, theater, school, and a packing shed where most women worked. Along with many others, she also has a garden in the back of town.

**Yes. The Chinese expect the town to be safe from the outside world. However, ever so often there are clashes. It seems we were able to live side by side as long as we left each other alone.**

Locke's narrow street only allows one car to drive through at a time.

Dad is 2/3rds through. A car comes towards him. He waits for them to back out. Instead 2 men get out of their car.

"Two against one." My 3 year-old sister is in the car. Dad slaps his thighs to think of what to do. By God, he just broke up a fight. He has a gun.

Dad's window is open and a fist lands on the side of his head.

Dad slams the butt of his gun on the assailant's scull. Blood oozes out.

The judge tells the white men, if they ever go into Locke again, it will be at there own risk.

At some point Dad is made an honorary Sheriff with a badge and the right to be armed.



**There were Locke families that at some point went back**

to Walnut Grove with the reconstruction after its fire.

Mom and dad, moves Lim Kee's Department Store from Locke to Walnut Grove in the late 1930s. They buy a commercial property which includes 3 bedrooms and 1 bath. It is next to the Bing Gong Tong.

Mom remodels the building and it double its size. It then includes 6 bedrooms and 3-1/2 baths. The master bath has a tub with a separate shower. It includes an indoor washer and dryer. The kitchen is modern for the time. It has a 4 burner cooktop, a built-in oven, a full size refrigerator, double sink. All finishes are stainless steel. It is built during World War II. Materials are hard to come by. My father has his contacts and is able to get them anyway. Don't know how he does it.

**Bing Gong Tong, an arm of the San Francisco Tong, was built in Walnut Grove.**



*I spend hours playing in the Tong while men spend their days playing card games or mahjong or whatever they do. And incense richly fills my nostrils as I watch the smoke spiral up in front of a shrine to the Gods. I drink tea out of the tea pot kept hot all they. I*

*drink from a tea cup washed in the old cold tea next to the tea pot.*

*It is a grand place to have community get-togethers and meetings. (I had my birthday party in the Tong when I was 13.)*

*The kitchen itself takes up just as much space as the size of the banquet room. Traditional dishes are made with professional perfection.*

*The only thing left today is the exterior design. San Francisco Tong is not interested in its preservation as they take all the Chinese furniture back to San Francisco.*

**In conclusion.**

*There are many more stories to be told, Hoping sharing some of the personal stories of our family helps broaden the understanding of how we lived.*

*Although my family was well to do, I always identify with those less fortunate. I work in the canneries and packing sheds.*



*For an extra 10 cents an hour, I work the midnight shift. I also feel guilty for taking a job away from one who may really need it. It influences my desire to be a social worker, studying Sociology.*

*Dad hustles himself through life. Along with my mother, they are just a few who are able to cross the color divide. They begin the thawing between the Chinese and White societies.*

*My father is fearless and confident as he lived a lively life. My mother is gracious and kind.*

*He is approached by hatchet men to be his body guards. He tells them he is his own body guard. My father has his own sense of justice. He is a diplomat when dealing with diplomats. He wields his fist against the fist of others.*

Today there is little left save for remnants of buildings leaning under the pressure of neglect. Today the Chinese history is preserved through a gambling museum, a Chinese school and a shrine to the memory of Locke. As the Chinese start their exodus from Locke, whites and other ethnicities infiltrate the town. Time has run out for "Once Upon A China town".

### LF Wish List

LF is always seeking volunteers willing to devote their skills and experience toward our dedicated mission. Individuals whose interests include history, grant writing, interpretation, computer skills, graphic design, advertising, carpentry, painting, and fund raising are especially welcome. Even if you are simply a people person we would greatly appreciate your participation. Our Visitors Center is always in need of a volunteers willing to donate 4 hours per month as a greeter.

### Miscellaneous Items Needed

- \* Chairs, tables
- \* Storage Shed
- \* 2D & 3D Artwork
- \* Gift Cards/Certificates
- \* Display cases
- \* Programmable cash register
- \* Raffle & Bingo Prizes
- \* Flat Bed Scanner
- \* Color printer
- \* Paint Brushes/Rollers
- \* Primer Paint
- \* Garden Tools
- \* Soaker Hoses
- \* Potting Soil
- \* Asian Vegetable Seeds
- \* Historic Locke Photos
- \* Historic Locke Artifacts
- \* Oral Histories of Locke
- \* Cash donations

Call (916)776-1684 if you can help.



## Chinese translation of Native Sons Historical Plaque

In April 2016, the Elk Grove chapter of Native Sons of the Golden West donated a historical marker to commemorate Locke's historic legacy. This marker was installed in the Main Street Park.

To accommodate many visitors from China and other Asian countries, the Locke Foundation recently installed a similar marker in Chinese in Main Street Park. The translation was done by volunteer Anita Lo.



Photo by James Motlow.

## Nelson Loo receives LF Service Award

Nelson Loo is a quiet unsung hero of Locke Foundation. Born in Courtland, he moved with his family to Locke from Elk Grove at the age of 14. An expert landscape mason, Nelson had been instrumental in creating the tile walls in Locke's Memorial Park. As new tiles are ordered and completed, Nelson installs them. He was recognized with a plaque acknowledging his selfless contributions to Locke on October 28, 2017.



LF president Sturt Walthall and secretary Honey Lum present Nelson Loo with plaque. Photo by Joe Chan.

## In Memoriam

### Roberta Jong Yee 1924-2017

Roberta Jong Yee, a long time resident of Palo Alto, a loving great-grandmother of 6, grandmother of 10 and mother of 4. She was a pioneer, one of the first Chinese-American women real estate professionals in Silicon Valley. She died on October 15 after a month-long struggle with a heart condition. At the age of 92, she was the matriarch and the last surviving family member of the Greatest Generation.

Roberta was born to Song Jong and Chai Ho Sun of Canton, China on Dec. 16, 1924. A tailor by trade from Winnemucca, NV, her father led his family back to their native village to help build a Presbyterian Church.

At the age of 6, Roberta returned to the U.S. with her family, including her older brothers Stanley and Francis, to settle in the Sacramento delta region where the family worked as tenant fruit tree farmers. One of the first places they resided in transition to life in America was the town of Locke, a town built especially for Chinese immigrants.



Roberta graduated from UC Berkeley with a degree in General Education. She married Dale Yee, a fellow Cal student. They lived in Dallas Texas before returning to Menlo Park to start their own business as a distributor of China Dry Goods.

Her life included a career in real estate and leadership in many civic

and church activities. Her humble origins were chronicled in Bitter Melon: Inside America's Last Rural Chinese Town. She was extremely loyal to Locke, brought 2 busloads of friends and family to the 2015 Locke Centennial and attended Locke reunion banquets in 2015 and 2016.

Roberta will always be remembered by her devotion to family, kindness, easy-going nature, sense of humor, story telling, delicious food, hats, service to others and "Can Do" spirit.

Services were held on November 11, 2017, in Palo Alto. She is survived by 4 children, 10 grandchildren and 6 great-grandchildren.



## Locke Foundation sweeps awards at CACS 30th anniversary gala

Chinese American Council of Sacramento, one of Locke Foundation's charter members, celebrated their 30th anniversary on October 14, 2017, at Sacramento Asian Sports Foundation complex. Clarence Chu received the 2017 Founders Award in recognition of his contributions to the historic town of Locke.



Left to right: Cathy Wei, CACSF president, Honey Lum, CACS president, Clarence Chu, Aubrie Fong, Legislative staff for Assembly member Kevin McCarty; Chris Mateo, Legislative staff for Assembly member Jim Cooper; Susan McKee, Chief of Staff, County Supervisor Patrick Kennedy.



Locke Foundation board member Brock Alexander and wife, Alma, won grand prize raffle of custom ring by Sharif Jewelers.

Photos courtesy of John Cho.

## Isleton Chinese Pavilion Restoration

Isleton Brannan Andrus Historical Society (IBAHS) has embarked on an ambitious project to restore the Chinese Pavilion on Isleton's Main Street to its former glory. The pavilion features 8 octagonal panels depicting the lives of Delta Chinese farmers and Confucian principles.



Chuck Hasz, president of IBAHS, invited Locke Foundation to assist in the restoration work. The Chinese and English text and artwork have been painstakingly redone by volunteer Anita Lo from the Locke Foundation.



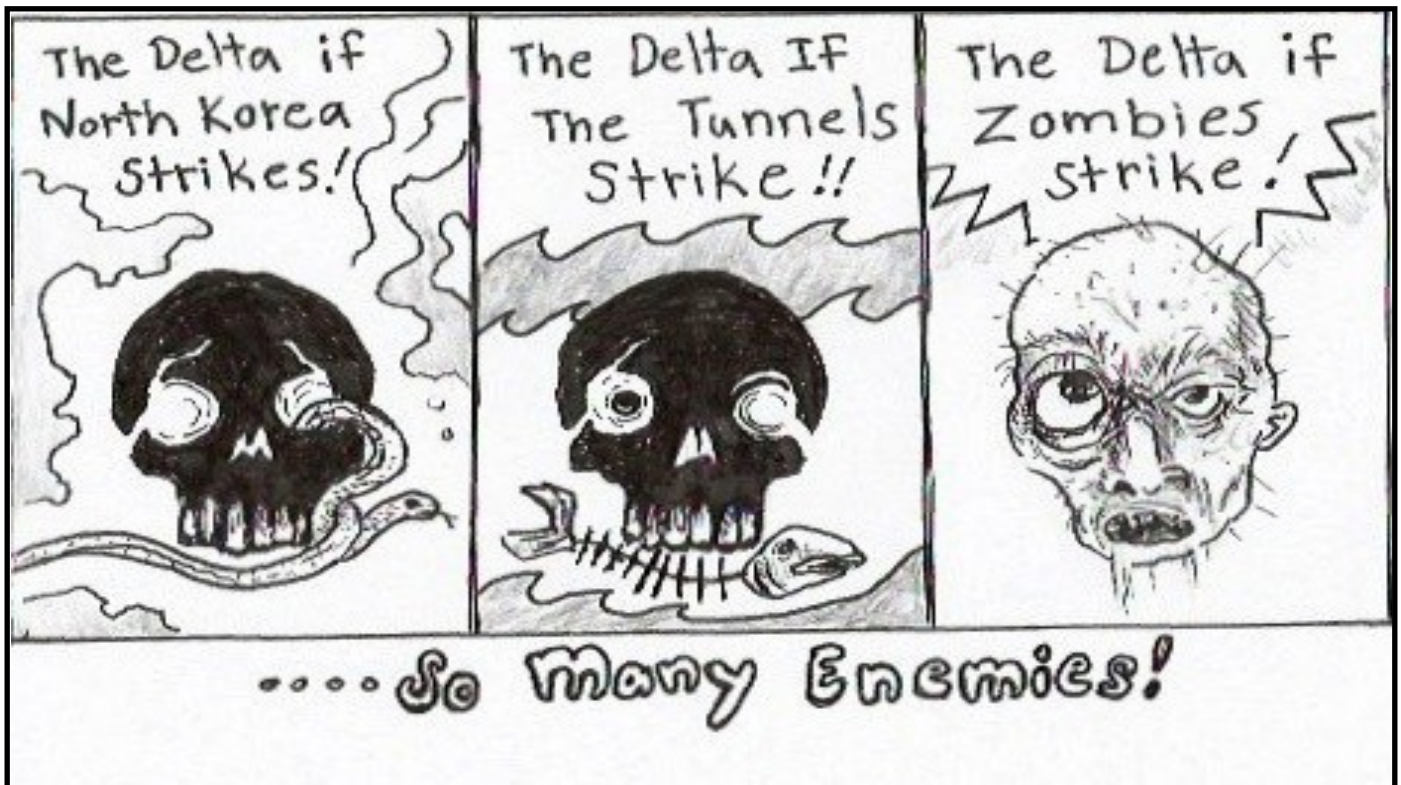
Above photos by Anita Lo.



Eileen Leung and Anita Lo display one of restored panels for Isleton Pavilion. Photo courtesy of Joe Chan.

## 2018 happenings

- February 3, 2018, Saturday, Sacramento Museum Day, free admission to area museums including Boarding House; [www.sacmuseums.org](http://www.sacmuseums.org)
- February 10, 2018, Saturday: Chinese New Year Celebration at Hiram Johnson High School, Sacramento, 11 am -5 pm. Eileen Leung is chair of this community event, representing Locke Foundation. Features lion dance, cultural stage programs, community exhibits, arts and crafts, children's games, food vendors. \$6 for adults, \$1 for kids under 12. [www.cnyca.net](http://www.cnyca.net)
- February 16, 2018: Chinese New Year of the Dog.
- February 17, 2018, Saturday: Chinese New Year activities at Boarding House. Free admission.
- February 24, 2018, Saturday, Chinese New Year parade in San Francisco, 6pm-8pm. Free admission
- March 4, 2018, Sunday, Chinese New Year Festival in Stockton Civic Center. Free admission.
- March 17, 2018: Saturday. 137th annual Bok Kai Festival in Marysville. Free admission.
- April 15, 2018, deadline for Locke high school scholarship applications. Information will be available on website by March 1, 2018.
- May 12, 2018, Saturday: Locke Asian Pacific Spring Festival on Main Street. Locke. Features lion dance, entertainment, arts and crafts, food vendors, scholarship awards, raffle prizes. Free admission.
- October 28, 2018, Saturday, Locke Foundation fundraiser, location to be announced.





## Locke Foundation Membership Application/Renewal

Last Name \_\_\_\_\_ First Name \_\_\_\_\_

Mailing address \_\_\_\_\_

Email address \_\_\_\_\_ Tel ( ) \_\_\_\_\_ Cell ( ) \_\_\_\_\_

I would like to volunteer for the following activities:

Volunteer docent \_\_\_\_\_ Donor \_\_\_\_\_ Visitor Center Volunteer \_\_\_\_\_

Contributor to newsletter \_\_\_\_\_ Media contacts \_\_\_\_\_ Landscape maintenance \_\_\_\_\_

### Membership Dues: circle one

\_\_\_\_\_ \$25 Individual Annual/\$200 Lifetime

\_\_\_\_\_ \$50 Family or Non-Profit Organization Annual/\$300 Lifetime

\_\_\_\_\_ \$100 Business Annual/\$500 Lifetime

Make check payable to Locke Foundation. Please return this form with check to Locke Foundation, P. O. Box 1085, Walnut Grove, CA 95690. Contributions are tax deductible to extent allowed by law. Tax ID: 20-0364281.

Office use only:

Date application received \_\_\_\_\_ Membership Year \_\_\_\_\_ Renewal \_\_\_\_\_

Locke Foundation  
P. O. Box 1085  
Walnut Grove, CA 95690

### 2017 Board

President: Stuart Walthall  
Vice-Pres: Clarence Chu  
Secretary: Honey Lum  
Treasurer: Eileen Leung

Directors: Brock Alexander  
Dustin Marr  
Darrel Woo

Newsletter: Eileen Leung  
Stuart Walthall

Cartoonist: Brock Alexander

