A Brief History of Chinatown

The Chinatown centered on Grant Avenue and Stockton Street in San Francisco, California, is the oldest Chinatown in North America and the largest Chinese enclave outside Asia. Since its establishment in 1848, it has been highly important and influential in the history and culture of ethnic Chinese immigrants in North America. Chinatown is an enclave that continues to retain its own customs, languages, places of worship, social clubs, and identity. There are two hospitals, several parks and squares, numerous churches, a post office, and other infrastructure. Recent immigrants, many of whom are elderly, opt to live in Chinatown because of the availability of affordable housing and their familiarity with the culture. San Francisco’s Chinatown is also renowned as a major tourist attraction, drawing more visitors annually than the Golden Gate Bridge.

Early History

Chinatown was the port of entry for early Chinese immigrants from the west side of the Pearl River Delta, in the Guangdong province of southern China from the 1850s to the 1900s. On August 28, 1850, at Portsmouth Square, San Francisco’s first mayor, John Geary, officially welcomed 300 "China Boys" to San Francisco. By 1854, the Alta California, a local newspaper which had previously taken a supportive stance on Chinese immigrants in San Francisco, began attacking them, writing after a recent influx that "if the city continues to fill up with these people, it will be ere long become necessary to make them subject of special legislation”.

Tin How Temple

Founded in 1852, the Tin How Temple (Queen of Heaven and Goddess of the Seven Seas) on Waverly Place is the oldest Chinese temple in the United States. It is dedicated to the goddess Tin How, the protector of seafarers, much honored by Chinese immigrants, especially arriving by ship, to San Francisco. The original building was destroyed in the 1906 earthquake, and it reopened on the top floor of a four-story building at 125 Waverly Place in 1910.

Chinese Exclusion Acts

Anti-immigrant sentiment became federal law once the United States Government passed the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882: the first immigration restriction law aimed at a single ethnic group. This law greatly reduced the numbers of Chinese allowed into the country and the city, and in theory limited Chinese immigration to single males only. Exceptions were in fact granted to the wives and minor children of wealthy merchants; immigrants would purchase or partner in businesses to declare themselves merchants in order to bring their families to America. Alternatively, prospective immigrants could become "paper sons” by purchasing the identity of Americans whose citizenship had been established by birthright.

Tong Wars

As in much of San Francisco, a period of criminality existed during the late 19th century; many tongs arose, trafficking in smuggling, gambling and prostitution. From the mid-1870s, turf battles sprang up over competing criminal enterprises. By the early 1880s, the term Tong war was being popularly used to describe these periods of violence in Chinatown. At their height in the 1880s and 1890s, twenty to thirty tongs ran highly profitable gambling houses, brothels, opium dens, and slave trade enterprises in Chinatown. Overcrowding, segregation, graft, and the lack of governmental control contributed to conditions that sustained the criminal tongs until the early 1920s.
In March 1900, a Chinese-born man who was a long-time resident of Chinatown was found dead of bubonic plague. The next morning, all of Chinatown was quarantined, with policemen preventing “Asiatics” (people of Asian heritage) from either entering or leaving. The San Francisco Board of Health began looking for more cases of plague and began burning personal property and sanitizing buildings, streets and sewers within Chinatown. Chinese Americans protested and the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association threatened lawsuits. The quarantine was lifted but the burning and fumigating continued. A federal court ruled that public health officials could not close off Chinatown without any proof that Chinese Americans were any more susceptible to plague than Anglo Americans.

The 1906 Earthquake and Fire Destroyed Most of Chinatown

Rebuilding

Even when the Subcommittee was bringing its relocation attempt to an end, the Chinese were already rebuilding, albeit with temporary wooden buildings which did not required permits. By June 10, 1906, twelve Chinese businesses were opened in Chinatown, including a couple of cafes. The actual reconstruction did not begin until October 1, 1906, when the City granted 43 building permits to Chinese businesses. By the time of the first post-quake Chinese New Year in 1907, several dozen buildings were completed, using old bricks unburnt by the fire, and Chinatown was filled with happy people. The reconstruction of Chinatown was completed more or less in 1908, a year ahead of the rest of the City. The Sing Ching and Sing Fat buildings were constructed using the pagoda style, popular in China. Dragon street lamps were installed in 1925.

Nightlife

The famous Sam Wo restaurant opened in 1912. In 1925 for the celebration of the San Francisco Diamond Jubilee, the Downtown Merchants Association, the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, and the San Francisco Diamond Jubilee Festival jointly raised $18,000 for 43 dragon street lamps to be cast in China and installed along Grant Avenue from Bush Street to Broadway. Designed by D’Arcy Ryan, who also designed the "Paths of Gold" streetlights on Market Street, the distinctive 2,750-lb street lamp, painted in traditional Chinese colors of red, gold and green, was composed of a cast-iron hexagonal base supporting a lotus and bamboo shaft surmounted with two cast-aluminum dragons below a pagoda lantern with bells and topped by a stylized hexagonal red roof[69] -- all in keeping with the Oriental style pioneered by Look Tin Eli. The new lamps made Grant Avenue the brightest street in the City at night.

Gang Violence

The presence of Chinese gangs remained significant in the immigrant community, and in the summer of 1977, an ongoing rivalry between two street gangs, the Wah Ching and the Joe Boys, erupted in violence and bloodshed, culminating in a shooting spree at the Golden Dragon Restaurant on Washington Street. Five people were killed and eleven wounded, none of whom were gang members. The incident has become infamously known as the Golden Dragon massacre. Five perpetrators, who were members of the Joe Boys gang, were convicted of murder and assault charges and were sentenced to prison. The Golden Dragon closed in January 2006 because of health violations, and later reopened as the Imperial Palace Restaurant.