Memories of a ‘lost’ community of Chinese people

When Song Wong was a child, it was her job to light the incense in respect to the kitchen god, the outside god, the front door god and other deities each morning and evening in the tiny Buddhist temple on the second floor of the building next to her home on Santa Rosa’s Second Street.

Song Wong Bourbeau, now 85, stood before the temple altar again Friday, in the gallery of the Sonoma County Museum, where it was reconstructed for the current historical exhibit. It was covered with the original altar cloth Song brought from her store of “treasures” to share with all who would know the history of Sonoma County’s Chinese.

Song is one of Santa Rosa’s last links with this lost community. For the Chinese history exhibit, she has shared her collection of all that is left of Santa Rosa’s “Chinatown” — photographs, her mother’s tiny shoes, her grandmother’s skirt made with elaborate “forbidden” stitches, statues of the Fu dogs that guarded the temple, art and sculpture from 19th-century China.

For historians, the most important element in the museum’s fine effort to honor and preserve its Chinese legacy, is Song herself. And her memories of Chinatown.

Santa Rosa’s Chinatown, a block of board sidewalks and wooden buildings on Second Street between Santa Rosa Avenue and D Street has been gone for 40 years. It disappeared, piece by piece, in the ’30s and ’40s as the property sold to businesses that razed the faded wooden structures to build tractor showrooms and auto repair shops. Where Chinatown was, there is now a city parking garage, bank and office buildings along the urban alley known as the Comstock Mall.

THE WONG FAMILY was at the center of Chinatown activities. Tom Wong, was his leader. Known as the “Mayor” of Chinatown, he was the labor contractor who could provide crews of workers to pick hops or grapes. He also was a storekeeper who sold goods to the Chinese workers. And he was a landlord, renting rooms under the temple or the stores to the single men who were his work force. He was the overseer of the Chinese lottery, which was conducted in every shop and store on the block. He and his wife, the spiritual leader also, being the designated keeper of the temple next door to his store and family home.

Wong’s home had been in Santa Rosa since before the Chinese boycott of the 1860s cut Sonoma County’s Chinese population by 80 percent. Lun Moon, mother of Song and her younger brother Harry, was Tom Wong’s fourth wife. He had grown sons who were also storekeepers in Santa Rosa’s Chinatown when the marriage to Lun Moon, who was much younger and a San Francisco native, was arranged through a traditional Chinese matchmaker.

The Chinatown where Song was born in 1909 and Harry seven years later, was a community unto itself. Some Chinese women who lived there ran the stores in her growing-up years. She and her mother were the only females. “My mother cooked for the men,” she said. “We had gardens at the back of our house and grew our own food. There was an apple dryer attached to the house. We raised chickens. I remember going down to the creek to catch fish and turtles. The water was clean and clear, cleaner than the water out of our faucets now. And we’d pick berries that grew along the creek bank. We knew right where to go. We even grew tobacco in the back. My mother and I would roll cigarettes in that thin rice paper until our fingers were sore.”

The Chinese owned none of the Chinatown property. Asked about this ownership, Song gives you a questioning look. “Don’t you know that Chinese were not allowed to own land?” The Second Street property, she recalls, was owned by the Hahman family and Bisordi brothers, who were uncle of Charles Bourbeau, Song’s sister’s husband.

There were a surprising number of stores and shops crowded into that single block. “Shacks,” is how Song remembers them. The rooms beneath the second-floor temple and above the stores housed up to 260 Chinese men in the harvest season.

But commerce was brisk in Chinatown. Tom Wong sold Chinese groceries and vegetables from his backyard garden and handmade cigarettes and whiskey made from rice, which was also manufactured on the premises. His brother, “Charlie” Qong Sing, sold rice, which he imported in 50-pound bales from China, and other Chinese food and gifts at Qong Sing Mercantile. Wong Tan, owned by another of Song’s uncles, was between the temple and Taiwan, the Japanese store owned by the Nagase family. Kim Lee was another of the mercantile establishments on Second Street. The stores of Song remembers, “you could get noodles for 10 cents a bowl.” There was a laundry at Second and D Streets, run by Song’s half-brother, Rob Wong. All of these establishments were primarily “fronts” for Chinese marijuana operations in the back room.

The only one of these Chinese businesses that would survive the disappearance of Chinatown was Jam Kee restaurant. When her grandfather, Poy Jam, opened his first restaurant in Chinatown, Song remembers, it had just two tables. He moved to larger quarters on Santa Rosa Avenue (then known as Main Street) and then to the block of Third Street where Song’s parents had been graduated from Santa Rosa Junior College and studied at Stanford University, joined him in the business. Song had worked at Jack’s General Store restaurant since her school days. When Poy retired, Songs and Charles became owners of Jam Kee, which moved to Fifth Street in the 1960s. It closed when Charles died in 1988. The building burned two years ago.

Song’s brother, Harry Wong, moved away from Santa Rosa as a young man, but returned when he retired. He and his wife, June, live in a house in the Sonoma wine country.

SOCIAL life wasn’t easy for the only Chinese girl in Santa Rosa. At Fremont School, Song remembers, the other kids called her names, and beat me up. I was afraid to go to school but my father insisted. He would take me every day: "The people who tormented her then were her friends and customers later. ‘We would laugh about it,’ she said. ‘Might as well laugh about it.’

Under the laughter, however, there is hurt. When her father died in the influenza epidemic of 1918, Song says, he was buried in the cool, damp, reserved for paupers. He was far from impoverished, but they wouldn’t allow Chinese to be buried in the IOOF Cemetery. When Song talks about this — and about the same restriction when her mother died in the 1930s, there is no laughter. Her grandfather, who was so important in her life, lived until the late 1950s and, by them, the racial barriers had come down so that his granddaughter could see him laid to rest in a proper grave in Santa Rosa Memorial Park.

Not all the Chinese residents of Santa Rosa lived in Chinatown. When Song was a child, there was a Chinese laundry on H Street. Songs remembers, later the site of the swanky 1940s restaurant, the Topaz Room. And her cousins, Sam and Minnie Wong and their sons Robbie and Wilson, had a Chinese restaurant in the first block of Fourth Street, near the railroad depot. It was a little house in back, near Baci’s Market. Song recalls the Second Street, “Restaurant in front, lottery in back.”

The lottery was simply a fact of life for the Chinese. It was played with words, not numbers. Song recalls, a big winner, Song recalls, might win $120. Once in a while, $100 on a Sate a pair, the club gets the Depression ($33.33). Before the deal, several large wooden crates marked with Chinese characters were delivered to the clubrooms. Inside were six tables of carved table with ox and key tops and 12 elaborately carved chairs — the finest examples of Chinese craftsmanship. Moor made an announcement. He had ordered the furniture, he said. It was his gift to the club. Members, who knew that the furniture had cost Moor a year’s salary, offered to pay, but he was adamant. So, after the dedication, the Elias staged a celebration in his honor.

Visitors to the museum’s Chinese exhibit will find, near the clothing display, a hand-colored photograph of “Moon Night” at the Chinese Club. All the members of the Chinese costumes. Moon himself is resplendent in a blue silk robe, felt-soled shoes and a black satin skullcap with the red bars of a Mandarin. His grandniece, Song in Chinese silk, is with him in the photograph.

SONA BOURBEAU

The Wong family, Tom Wing, Lan Moon and children, ca. 1914. Song is at far right.

SONA BOURBEAU

Song and her grandfather Poy owned Jam Kee.