

FRESNO MEMORIES

BY

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Chinese At Millerton

Not all the Chinese coolies at Millerton were miners. Besides the burro packers a numbers of gardeners produced green stuff not only for the camps of their own countrymen, but for the tables of the white people into whose scheme of life tilling the soil did not enter. Such vegetables—strange foreign things grown to incredible size and goodness in the black alluvial banks of the San Joaquin! Radishes—ivory or ebony—long and thick as a woman's forearm. Snap beans with pods a writhing yard in length. "Chiny lettuce"—crisp, slender pale-green leaves—and many of the American edible plants as well.

These the grower conveyed from door to door in deep rattan baskets hung one on each side of a burro pack saddle, or suspended from both ends of a pole balanced on his own shoulder. Sometimes he carried the sweet little Mission grapes and juicy Indian cling peaches from these early day plantings, but, whatever might be the contents of the baskets, whether he was whacking his burro along, or himself trotting through the dust, John Chinaman was a most welcome sight to the housewives and the children of Millerton.

In the county seat settlement Ah Kit had a blacksmith shop where he mended tools and shod horses for white and yellow alike, which was reasonable, for while Kit did the work, Jeff Shannon, who was a son-in-law of Judge Baley, furnished the capital. Ah Kit was one of the very few Oriental heads of resident families, and, whether from gratitude or affection or policy, he named his baby son for the white man. However it might have been, Jeff Shannon Kit grew up to be a credit to his namesake.

Very few were the Celestial households in the mining center. Mrs. Scott Ashman had a Chinese servant in the early seventies, as had Mrs. E. C. Winchell, and one or two others at different times. In all these homes the boy, young and ignorant of even the language, was engaged through a "cousin" or an "uncle" who was supposed to be responsible for him. With great kindness and patience the youths were taught the customs and requirements of American households,

but it is interesting to imagine the perplexity of the boy of a northern housekeeper comparing notes with the lad from a home of the south.

Often a real affection developed between the China boy and the family for whom he worked, especially between himself and the children with whom he was unfailingly generous and dependable. When, in the fall of 1873, Mrs. Ashman passed away, leaving five little ones, the youngest a wee baby, her China boy was seen stumbling blindly along the road, tears running down his face. To a questioner he wailed with pitiful flaps of slim brown hands, "Ooo Missee As-man, he die las' ni, he die!" Faithful and kind, Wing continued his accustomed care of the home and family until Judge and Mrs. Baley, the young mother's parents, had helped Mr. Ashman to make the last sad arrangements and close the house.

By the time the county seat was removed to the Valley in 1874, gold mining on the upper San Joaquin had reached a low ebb, with consequent diminishing of population in Millerton of both white people and Chinese. Ah Kit and his family, Hop Wo and Tong Sing, the Chinese merchants, with their retainers—all joined the exodus. In the Chinatown that with tacit consent settled on its own side of the railroad track all these Orientals set up their respective business establishments and all flourished in the new location, one of the old Millerton names being still in evidence.

The handful of pale and ghostlike yellow miners that was left to the patient digging and washing of San Joaquin gold obtained their small necessities at Hampton's store at the bridge where the village is now called Friant. When the sands ceased to render tribute they disappeared. The bones of the Chinese dead, buried where most convenient to the living, were disinterred, boxed up and shipped to their native land, outside of which no Chinaman can rest, and from which place alone can his soul arise. Except for the rusting and broken doorway of Tong Sing's vanished brick store on the old army road to Fort Miller, remains no sign of the Chinese at Millerton.