

FRESNO MEMORIES

BY

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Chinese Of The San Joaquin Mines

Mysteriously following discovery of California gold mines appeared the Chinese at every location. As soon as the white men on the upper San Joaquin—gorgeous in black hats, scarlet shirts and white breeches—looked up from their rockers and sluices they saw little quiet brown men in faded blue and flapping garments busily digging nearby. Of course the established system of staked and declared claims limited the alien operations from the first, but with the exception of a few renegades no one molested them.

Less ambitious and energetic, more patient and persistent, they worked showings scorned by the white men, and even dug and washed over with satisfaction to themselves claims abandoned as no longer worthy of a white man's efforts. Until late in the eighties an occasional old Chinaman could be seen pottering in the gravel beds below the old Millerton courthouse, a pale figure blending in the scene of blue and gray. Queer little huts, odorous with the inevitable smell of the Asiatic, blossomed with brodiaea or lupine or Indian warrior arranged in an old oyster can or a ginger jar.

As the white population of Millerton grew during the fifties and the sixties, and the mines extended up and down the Joaquin, the Chinese element kept pace and became a matter to be reckoned with. Never turbulent nor intrusive, yet they had peculiar needs that must be met in regular and adequate manner. Gold promising to be inexhaustible in the river, organization of Fresno county in 1856, and the establishment at Millerton of the official center, led Chinese merchants to undertake provision for their countrymen, and presently the Hop Wo and Tong Sing stores, were opened up in good brick buildings at the upper edge of the town.

The army road to Fort Miller passed their doors, and the brick walled cellar, with granite steps and fragments of iron doorway, still marks the site of one of these establishments. To carry the supplies to the mining camps of their respective clansmen, each merchant maintained his own pack-train, and the river banks and the red hill beyond the fort echoed early or late the jingle of donkey bells and the shrill falsetto, "Hi, jekesse! hi, yi-yi, jekesse!" of peevish Chinese drivers.

All sorts and any kind of habitation contented the Chinamen. Of brush and boards, of rice mats and kerosene tins, the tiny shelters were grouped on a spot hopeless for min-

ing, and yet near to water for their perpetual ablutions. Nondescript wearing apparel was forever draped on bushes or strung on sagging cords, from mud fireplaces willow smoke intermittently arose and horrid smells hung like an invisible unwavering mist. Lurking in a hut an old Celestial kept guard, and an unfamiliar footstep would bring his furtive yellow face to the opening, bearing eyes blinking and pigtail dangling about his knees. It was no use to talk to him; the most persuasive accents received but the invariable emotionless response "No savvy," in monotonous reiteration.

This creature was cook as well as guardian, and nothing human could be simpler than his duties. Three times a day he set before the gang a great copper cooking bowl of steaming rice, a dish of balled fish or pork or fowl or small game, another dish of raw or cooked vegetables and a pot of tea, everything soft, or cut into small bits. Every man helped himself and afterward washed his bowl and chopsticks, so, all in all, housekeeping duties rested lightly on the cook.

In season the caterer to the Chinese mining camp caught fish from the river. Sometimes he purchased chickens from the local housewives, his insinuating "You got loositah? How moochee? Sss-bit?" precluding the exchange of 75 cents for a leggy superfluous rooster from the dooryard flock. Also, he was a dependable market for rabbits and squirrels, and several of the foothill boys earned ammunition and jack-knives in the profitable barter.

Digging and ditching and washing, fresh water was all around the miners all the day, but while a thirsty white man or Indian would scoop up a drink from the stream, a Chinaman never did. Near at hand every group had a big pot of tea and at intervals one of the little Mongolians would lay down his tool, splash over to the pot, pour out a thimbleful of the tannic infusion and trickle it luxuriously down his throat.

For more than 30 years the Joaquin at Millerton staged the colorless, uneventful life of Chinese miners. It was not the changing of the county seat nor the abandonment of the pioneer settlement that finally brushed them off the scene. The time came when there was no more gold for even a Chinaman, and then the last pale little digging form disappeared from the bank of the historic river.

Millerton - Nest - file