

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Bok Kai Temple Marysville, California

The Chinese community in Marysville dates back to the “Gold Rush” days of the mid-1800’s. The history of Chinese in Marysville dates back to about 1850, two years after the first documented Chinese came to California.

Drawn to California by tales of wealth and easy living, Chinese men left their homeland to seek their fortune and bring back some of the wealth to China. Because many of the Chinese couldn’t pay passage to the West, they took advantage of a credit-ticket system, where passage was advanced to the individual with the expectation that future earnings would repay the debt. Others received passage in return for a signed contract requiring them to labor for a specified period of time with their salary going to the contract holder.

Once in California, the Chinese soon realized that they had been misled. In the foreign land they were often mistrusted because of physical differences, language barriers and cultural beliefs. They often were relegated to inferior status by other Californians. The fact that Chinese would toil at jobs that Caucasians wouldn’t do added to the gap between the races.

In 1850, there were 4,025 Chinese recorded as being in the United States. In 1860, Yuba County registered a population of 1,781 Chinese residents. By 1870, Yuba County’s Chinese population peaked at 2,337 and Marysville became known throughout California as “Thlom Fow”, or “Third Town”, by the Chinese in San Francisco and Sacramento which were known as “Dai Fow”, or “Big Town” and “Ngay Fow”, or “Second Town” respectively. This makes the Chinatown section of Marysville one of the oldest Chinese communities still in existence in the United States.

Because of Marysville’s strategic location near the Sacramento and Feather Rivers, it was a natural place to offer merchandising services to the mining camps to the north and east. Realizing this, many Chinese established businesses in Marysville and remained. These businesses served as a place for Chinese to shop as they journeyed to and from the mines and other outlying labor camps. Marysville also became a place for rest and entertainment for thousands of Chinese miners and laborers during this period. The Marysville Chinese community became a bustling and lively place during weekends and holidays – often drawing between 500 and 2,000 Chinese at times.

Marysville became a cultural and entertainment center for the Chinese as well. It included the Suey Sing and Hop Sing Lodges, which are still in existence, a Masonic Lodge, Gee Kong Tong (a Chinese school) and two opera houses. The Gee Kong Tong Opera House was in the Masonic building located on the east side of C street between First and Front Streets. Both of these opera houses regularly scheduled top entertainers from San Francisco and China during these early days.

In 1854, about four years after the first contingent of Chinese arrived in Marysville, they erected a Temple, the Bok Kai Mui, where they could house their Gods and go to worship.

After the mining and railroad construction activities diminished, many of the Chinese moved to Marysville and worked at various occupations. They worked as gardeners farming vegetables, helped develop some of the present day irrigation canals, labored on farms in the area, opened restaurants and general stores and laundered clothes. Others worked to build the first levees in Marysville and the surrounding area.

The Chinese population declined after the decline of gold mining in the 1860’s and the completion of the transcontinental railroad in the 1870’s. by 1900, Yuba County registered a Chinese population of 719. Sutter County’s Chinese population which in 1860 was recorded as 2, climbed slowly but steadily to 226 by 1900.

The Bok Kai Temple

The Bok Kai Temple is located at the end of D Street and Front Street on the northern bank of the Yuba River in Marysville. It is the place, as it has been for over a century, of worship for Chinese in Northern and Central America who pay tribute to Bok Eye, their water God or God of the Dark North. It is the only known temple honoring Bok Eye in the United States, and it has drawn countless worshippers and tourists throughout the years.

The first Bok Kai Temple was built in 1854 nearly two blocks upstream on the Yuba River from the present structure. There are several Gods placed in the temple. This is the reason one of the temple's standards bears in Chinese writing: "Palace of Several Saints". Bok Eye (or I) is the central Deity in this place of worship. Of the five Gods in the main altar, Bok Eye is situated in the center, glanced by the others. Bok Eye is believed to possess powers controlling floods, waters of irrigation and the rains. Bok Eye, according to the Chinese, means Northern or Dark North (Bok) and God (Eye or I).

Bok Eye was once human, as were many Chinese gods and was "promoted" to heaven because of his good deeds. He has had many names from Bok I (Cantonese) to Pei Ti (Mandarin) to the commonly used Bok Eye (Roman). The god of waters has many legends surrounding his existence. One account says he appeared more than 4,000 years ago during the Hsia Dynasty in China where he helped control the waters and introduced flood control. This earned him the title, "Spirit of the North".

He was a great warrior and during the fall of the Shang Dynasty, his more dramatic deeds were recorded. A demon king, Wo Wang, came to Earth to destroy mankind and Bok Eye came to man's aid as a commander of a dozen heavenly armies. Wo Wang sent a great tortoise and a gigantic serpent to destroy him but they were subdued instead. Many statues depict Bok Eye as barefoot and standing on the conquered snake and tortoise.

Another god on the altar is a Chinese female deity, Sing Moo. She generally is worshipped by seamen or ocean travelers for safe journeys. It is believed her placement in the temple is in gratitude for the thousands of Chinese who arrived safely in the United States after the long voyages across the Pacific Ocean.

For the healing of illness and injury, there is Wa-Ho, the god of health or surgery in general. Another female deity is Gone Yim, the goddess of mercy.

A top military advisor and warrior in the group is Gon Gung, who exercises bravery and fair play and also carries the title God of Literature. Yuk Fung or Tai Sing is a god who holds the position of Secretary of State. God of Earth is Hoo Gee and God of Wealth is Ts'ai Shen or Choy Bok Sing Quan.

The temple is appropriately named the Bok Kai Mui, which means Temple (Mui) of the North (Bok) side of the stream (Kai). When the original temple was destroyed, the present one was built on property which was once the site of a bathhouse near the river. The present temple was completed in 1880. It contains three rooms – the main altar area, a community meeting room and a storage room.

The fragrance of incenses permeates the altar room of the Temple and gifts decorate it. Many of the older Chinese come to the Temple to pray and to offer food, wine and money to Bok Eye, the other Gods and Goddesses at the Temple and also to their ancestors. The food, once offered, is taken back home and the money is only symbolic pieces of paper.

In earlier times it was believed that evil spirits could transform themselves into human form, with the exception of their feet, which remained hoof-like. So, a small ledge was placed in the Marysville Temple and other temples, requiring men and women to lift their gown to step over it. In that way the "non-humans" could be detected.

Bok Kai Festival

The Parade Dragon

Kim Lung II is the third dragon to find a home in Marysville. The brilliantly-painted dragon arrived in January 1985 from Kowloon, China. The newest dragon was purchased with contributions from the Yuba-Sutter business community and the Chinese community. Costing \$5,000, Kim Lung is 150 feet long and requires 75 dancers to bring him to life.

The first dragon, Moo Lung, was made in China and cost between \$5,000 and \$6,000 before the turn of the century. It was the first parade dragon brought to the United States. When first brought from China, Moo Lung stretched out over 150 feet, utilizing about 100 men to carry him. Tears had shortened the giant serpent to 100 feet when he was last seen in 1937 in a parade in San Francisco. Moo Lung was regarded as the largest and finest parade dragon in the entire United States up to the Second World War.

Moo Lung was the featured attractions of all the early Bomb Day processions. So famous was he that Chinese communities in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle and many more cities obtained his services in parades. In fact, Moo Lung was once exhibited at a World's Fair in New York City. Moo Lung paraded last in Marysville in 1930.

The Marysville Chinese community had been without a dragon since 1937, when the venerable Dragon Moo Lung was retired after years of service. The second dragon, Kim Lung (I), came to Marysville in 1969 from San Francisco. His elongated body of 120 feet was topped with a beautifully crafted 100 pound head. Kim Lung cost \$1,500 and required 50 dancers to animate him. He was retired in 1984 making way for the third and present dragon, Kim Lung II.

Bomb Day

Bomb Day, or in Chinese, Yee Yeut Yee, takes its' name from the colorful firing of the bombs highlighting the celebration which is in tribute to the Chinese Water God, Bok Eye.

Each year on the second day of the second month of the Chinese lunar year, the Chinese community of Marysville and volunteers from throughout the area join in putting on the Bomb Day celebration, which marks Bok Eye's birthday. When the day falls on a weekday, the festivities usually are held for two days during the weekend.

The annual two-day event draws thousands from Marysville and surrounding communities. It also attracts thousands of Chinese from all parts of the United States, Canada and Mexico, who come to worship at the Bok Kai Temple and join in the festivities.

Although the celebration includes the colorful parade, exhibitions by Lion Dancers, banquets and other entertainment, the highlight of the event is the firing of the bombs.

One hundred bombs are fired in a roped arena where young Chinese and occasionally adults, scramble for "good fortune" rings which are shot into the air from the bursting bombs. These rings traditionally bring good fortune to the holder throughout the year. The rings may be kept by those who retrieve them in the scramble, but often they are sold to people who want to keep the lucky charms for a year. Those who purchase them, in turn, pay a fee at the temple to hold the rings.

The number 4 ring is the luckiest, and therefore the most sought after ring of all and brings on the liveliest scramble when the bombs are fired. In addition to the fun and excitement of the celebration, Bomb Day has another aspect—it enables the Chinese to worship at the temple, which honors Bok Eye, worshipped by the Chinese for banishing evil spirits and for controlling rains and floods of spring in time for planting.

There are no record pinpointing exactly what year bomb Day was initiated in Marysville, but it is assumed by most Chinese the event must have been observed as far back as the 1860's when the first Bok Kai Temple was built. People who have done research on the Temple, though, look to the year 1880 when the present Temple was dedicated as the start of Bomb Day celebrations in Marysville.