

PAJARO VALLEY HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION
SPEECH
THE SAGA OF THE DONG FAMILY
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Although I was born and lived only eighteen years here in Pajaro Valley, and fifty years in San Francisco, I have always considered Watsonville my home town. It seems to me that the words, home town, evokes a particular feeling and emotion in all small town boys. Let me give you an example of what I mean.

All of you who are interested in baseball must have heard of Vida Blue, the pitching ace of the Oakland baseball team. In a very short time, he has won seventeen games. He is acclaimed by the sports-minded world as a great hero. Everywhere he goes he is followed by a crowd of admirers. Sports writers are writing reams about his accomplishments. Television and radio studios are hounding him to make personal appearances. In the midst of all this adulation, Vida Blue is not very happy. He is not happy because he did not receive a telegram of congratulations from his home town of Mansfield, Mississippi, which has a population of approximately five hundred people. Now in my case, it is different. I did receive a flattering letter from you, after fifty years absence, to come home to speak today.

In these intervening years, I have accomplished many of my objectives and goals. Today, being recognized by my home town folks and being asked to speak to you is certainly one of the most gratifying moments of my life. It is an achievement that I will cherish for a long time to come.

A short time ago I wrote to Miss Myra Harris, my high school History teacher, and told her that my conversation with you today would be an interesting insight into a subculture which existed in Pajaro and about which I am sure not many people were aware.

On the surface, I wrote, all of your students were more or less alike. But when we Chinese students went home, it was to another world and another culture. We lived in a "little China" transplanted here in America. We lived in a Chinatown which was practically an enclave within the Pajaro Valley. The social structure, the customs and traditions, the religious beliefs, and the business and financial transactions were identical to those of a Chinese town or village in China. The western influence did not penetrate this Chinese community of Pajaro until years later, when the second generation started to attend American schools.

In order that you might better follow my reminiscences, let me deviate here for a moment to give you a background of the cause of the sudden influx of Chinese immigrants during the last century. From 1847 to 1850 great droughts in China caused tremendous crop failures and widespread famine in the province of Canton. Concurrently news arrived in China about the discovery of gold in California. These two incidents resulted in an exodus of many thousands of Chinese to America. For the first seventy-five years, almost one hundred per cent of the Chinese came to America from four districts

around Hong Kong. This area was approximately the combined size of the Santa Cruz and Monterey counties. Most of the immigrants were married men. They came to America only to earn enough money to buy land in China to which they planned to return. Some of these men were only recently married, an arrangement made by their parents to insure their return to their homeland. The mental orientation of these so-called inscrutable Chinese was that of a temporary worker or visitor, a sojourner. They lived frugally in order to be able to send every cent that they could spare home to invest in land in China. They made no effort to adopt American customs, clothes, language, or habits, except sometimes for business reasons, and even then only minimally. They insulated themselves from the Caucasians and devoted themselves exclusively to achieving social status in China by the sweat of their brows in America. This was the mental orientation and life style of the inhabitants of the Pajaro Chinatown into which I was born and raised.

In the early part of this century, the permanent population of this little village was about one thousand to fifteen hundred people, with a transient agricultural population during the season swelling it to about two or three thousand. The Pajaro Chinatown was built and owned by the Porter family. It consisted of a main street with approximately twenty wooden buildings on each side. The structures were built in the conventional Western style, similar to those we all see in the Western movies on television. The ground floor of each building was used for business, and the second floor was used for living quarters. However, there was one structure at the end of the street called the Chinese joss house, the architecture of which was different. It was graphed with some Chinese ornamentation, with carved pillar decorations, and topped with the traditional curved Chinese roof. Directly across the street from this joss house was a Methodist mission. It was headed by Mr. Dollenmeyer, the minister, and Miss Reis, the Sunday school teacher. The purpose of this mission was to teach English at night to the Chinese who were interested in learning the language and to conduct a Sunday school to acquaint the children and young adults with Christianity. They made no attempt to try to convert the older members of the community, because that would have been a hopeless task.

The remaining buildings of Chinatown were occupied by the following businesses: six mercantile stores, two poultry and meat markets, one restaurant, several fan tan and gambling houses, for the relaxation of workers on their day off, two barber shops, and one herbalist, with his dozens of drawers of different medicinal herbs. The herbalist also acted as the physician for the community. Next to the joss house was a small voluntary fire department. The businesses in this Chinatown catered exclusively to the Chinese of the surrounding areas. Their stock and merchandise was geared to the needs of the Chinese immigrants, and occasionally a few Caucasians would venture into Chinatown to purchase Chinese tea or eat in the restaurant.

Before telling you any more about this little Chinatown, let me recount to you an interesting twist of fate, and apparent destiny, that established the Dong family here. If it had not happened, I would not be here today to reminiscence with you.

The saga of the Dong Family began in 1873 in the city of Hong Kong. Dong Ten Song, which translated means, Dong Heavenly Star, an ambitious lad of nineteen, had just finished his apprenticeship as a goldsmith. He had heard glowing tales about the golden hills of California. He bought passage on

one of the clipper ships to San Francisco hoping to pick up enough gold to return home to continue with his profession. The clipper ship on which he traveled had a capacity of seventy-five people, but the exploiters had filled the ship with one hundred and fifty passengers. In the overcrowded ship without enough food, air, and water, young Dong became ill the very first day of the voyage, and continued to be violently seasick for the next forty days. He often told us about his agonizing and terrifying sea voyage. He recalled that when he left China he was measured 5' 9" tall and 150 pounds, and that when he arrived in San Francisco and went through Customs, he was only 5' 7" tall and 120 pounds. Stepping off the ship Dong Ten Song expected some sort of a welcome from his relatives. But instead he stepped into an atmosphere of the first anti-Chinese feeling in San Francisco. The economic boom of the Pacific coast had come to an end; railroads had been completed, five million acres of swamp land had been reclaimed, and the industries that were needed on the West Coast had been developed. The mines had been opened and the period of quick money had ended. Thousands of people were out of work. Some of the white immigrants were the strong and adventurous types who had no intention of working for wages. Their failure to make a fortune in the West and the consequent bitterness created an anti-railroad, anti-corporation, anti-capital, and especially an anti-Chinese sentiment. As the number of Chinese immigrants grew, the animosity toward them also grew. Soon every ship of Chinese immigrants landing on the San Francisco wharves could depend on a welcome of rocks and bricks from the howling and screaming hoodlums.

After staying about a month with San Francisco relatives to recuperate from his long and arduous trip, young Dong was advised to go to Salinas Valley to look for work because there the anti-Chinese feelings were almost non-existent. Taking his relatives advice, he boarded a stage coach to Gonzales, where he found work with a Spanish Family. After four years of labor serving as a cook, houseboy, and handyman, he learned to speak Spanish fluently and almost forgot his Chinese.

From his twenty dollars a month salary, he managed to save eight hundred dollars. He then quit his job and started a small general merchandise store of his own. This was the only one of its kind in Gonzales and catered exclusively to Chinese agricultural workers. He stocked his store with everything from clothes and shoes to picks and shovels. From San Francisco he brought in imported Chinese food stuff, vegetables and other foreign items. For the next five years, his store flourished and he started another one in Salinas. In the meantime he had sent to China for his younger brother to manage one of his stores.

In 1893 there was an economic boom around Pajaro Valley. A new Chinatown was being built. One of the organizers persuaded merchant Dong to sell his interest in Gonzales and Salinas and invest in this new Pajaro venture. He took over two of the new buildings, #3 and #4 Chinatown Street. On the second floor of the #3 building, he opened the first Chinese restaurant in Pajaro. On the ground floor Dong started another store similar to his prosperous Salinas and Gonzales operations. During the next seven years he was not only a successful restaurateur and mercantile operator, but he had also invested in farming, which brought him rich returns.

Because he was still a bachelor, all of his cousins were pressuring him to return to China to acquire a bride and carry on the family line. Remembering that horrendous and terrifying experience he

had coming over on the clipper ship from Hong Kong, Dong found many excuses to delay his trip to China. Two years previously his younger brother had returned to China to establish his family, but he had died of an intestinal disease before he had any children. Now it was Dong Ten Song's responsibility and obligation to marry and carry on his blood line. Since he had repeatedly refused to return to China for this purpose, his relatives sent word throughout California that there was a wealthy and influential merchant in Pajaro Valley who was looking for a bride. As I pointed out to you before, ninety-five percent of the Chinese immigrants were sojourners whose wives were in China and therefore there were very few families with daughters of marriageable age in America. Fortunately for Dong, a go-between or matchmaker from Marysville brought him a picture of a very beautiful sixteen year old Chinese girl for possible marriage. Being happy and satisfied with the picture and image of the proposed bride, he sent a picture of himself back to the young lady for her approval.

Many years later, Mother told us that several members of her family had tried to discourage the marriage because of Dong's advanced age of forty-four years. They feared that she would become a young widow soon, but Dong fooled them because he outlived all of his critics.

Finally, when the preliminary amenities were settled both families went through the typical stereotyped betrothal and marriage ceremony, which the Chinese have carried on for centuries. The first step was an investigation of the family tree, to make sure that for the past three generations there had been no insanity, no contagious or hereditary disease. Here in California we only recently adopted the blood test before a marriage certificate can be issued. The second step in the formalities was a period of exchange of gifts consisting mainly of special cakes, wine, barbecued pig, and other comestibles. These exchanges helped to improve the relationship between the two families.

The climatic day was on October 11, 1898, the wedding day between forty-four year old Dong Ten Song and the sixteen year old Jue Jade Pearl. A horse and carriage decorated with Chinese banners brought the bride from Watsonville Junction to #3 Chinatown. She wore a beautiful red gown embroidered with dragons. Her lovely features were covered with a heavy red veil. The bride's arrival in Chinatown was heralded by firing of hundreds of strings of firecrackers and it started a carnival celebration that lasted for three days and nights. Two Chinese orchestras and several opera singers were brought in from San Francisco to entertain the guests. It was the largest and most festive wedding celebration held outside of San Francisco. The old timers of Pajaro who attended the wedding festivities were so impressed that they were still talking about it when we were teenagers.

In retrospect, one can see that there is no element of love in a typical Chinese marriage. It was arranged by a matchmaker, but all things considered, the degree of happiness that often reigns in the family is very surprising. The archaic system is to marry first and make love afterwards. We may condemn and laugh at this Chinese view of marriage, but, in all the years of my parents' marital relationship, I have never heard them quarrel.

On January 15, 1901, the hopes and prayers of all their relatives and friends were answered – the first male child was born to this union. There was great rejoicing and another huge community celebration was held one month after the baby's birth. From 1901 to 1918, eleven little Dong children

were born to this couple. Two of them died in infancy, and the other nine, six girls and three boys, were all brought up in this little bit of China in Pajaro Valley. One of the most poignant recollections of those days was of my Mother getting up every morning, for an interminable number of years, to wash diapers with the old wash board and tub, using the brown Naphtha soap. Since then, I have frequently had pleasant dreams of our back porch filled with rows and rows of white diapers flapping gently in the wind.

I was the second child born to the family on May 19, 1903, and spent the next eighteen years of my life in the Pajaro Chinatown, with very little contact with Caucasian families except for a few hours that I spent in the American Schools.

Fifty years have now elapsed since my graduation from Watsonville High School. About a month ago, I received a nice letter from Mr. Hubert Wyckoff stating that the Board of Directors of the Pajaro Valley Historical Association had unanimously invited me to be the speaker of the day on the subject of informal reminiscences of our Pajaro Chinatown.

Since I left my home town I have lived a life resolutely oriented toward the future. I have an obsession to always plan years ahead. Suddenly, I have been asked to think backwards and to live a little in the past. This reversal of cogitation almost floored me, but when I sat down to my nostalgic task, I found that it was full of pleasantries and enjoyment. It reminded me of the dissection of a human body during my student days at Stanford University, only this time it is to dissect the Chinese society in Pajaro that has influenced my whole life and my philosophy.

In trying to recall those eighteen years I lived in Pajaro Chinatown, I found that the life style and life stances of the Chinese inhabitants were much different than yours. Aside from the amusing fact that the 49ers used to think that the Chinese all look alike, and therefore, they would all think alike, the Chinese culture, with all its aspects is a complex and confusing one, no matter how you try to analyze it.

So to reminisce with you about this subcultural group in a more or less logical way, I have dissected their society into the following categories: (1) the social structure, (2) the religious beliefs, (3) the celebration of holidays, (4) the food, and (5) the Chinese views on education.

The social structure of the Pajaro Chinatown was a prototype of all other Chinatowns. The most important social unit in the Chinese society was the family, not the individual, not the village, and not the state. It was a patriarchal society with the father ruling over his family, its property, and even the marriage of his children. Obedience and filial piety were ingrained in childhood and it resulted in respect for the elders. The immigrants from China to Pajaro Valley brought along these attitudes and philosophies which definitely influenced their behavior here in America. For many years, the Chinese people would not bring their disputes or quarrels into the American courts. The joss house, at the end of the street, had a large hall for the gathering of the elders of the clans for settling of dissent and discord. They formed a council which imposed a variety of punishments ranging from a reprimand to removal from the clan's roll. This naturally involved a loss of face for the offender. Another very good reason for not bringing their problems and quarrels out to the American society was that the Chinese did not wish to spoil their image of being a peaceful and honest people.

The religious beliefs of the heathen Chinese, as they were referred to, had fascinated Americans for over a century. The joss house that I mentioned earlier did not equate with your churches. There were no routine services or meetings held in this temple. The temple was used only in periods of need and for offerings during certain times of the year.

The Chinese really were not a very religious group; nor did they believe in any one religion. This is not surprising in a people who had always respected the beliefs of others and had found no inconsistencies in accepting parts of the beliefs of several religions. It is a phenomenon typical of the Far East. No one in China would find incongruity in the same family using the ritual of one religion for a marriage ceremony, that of another for celebrating a birth, and that of a third religion for marking a funeral. Long before St Paul said "Prove all things, hold fast that which is good" Eastern philosophy advocated it, and the Orientals practiced it.

At this point, I would like to interject a relevant and interesting footnote about Tricia Nixon's wedding at the White House a few weeks ago. The ceremony almost simulated a Chinese ritual. One of the society editors reported the wedding as follows: "Booklets were given as mementoes from the White House. In the books the wedding guests could follow the progress of the unique ceremony, a blend of Episcopal, Methodist, and Catholic marriage rituals. Tricia is a Quaker, Edward is an Episcopal, and the minister is a Methodist."

But, now back to Pajaro. The typical Chinese immigrant is a religious and ethical eclectic, drawing the essence of his beliefs from Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, and Christianity. In our home there was a prominent place for two golden idols; one in the living room, and one in the kitchen. During certain holidays throughout the year, we were taught to go through the ceremonial practices of the Chinese eclectic religion. Bowing before these images, burning incense, lighting red candles, we thanked them for all they had done for the family and the house during the past year. The prayer would end with the burning of paper money, which are pieces of rice paper with symbols of money drawn on them.

Then on Sunday the religious eclectism of the Orientals manifested itself, for there were no objections from Father when Mother dressed all of us in our best clothes to attend Sunday School to be inculcated with the enlightening principles of Christianity.

The social life in this Chinese community was practically nil except for two holidays, Chinese New Year and Ching Ming, the memorial day for the dead. The celebration of Chinese New Year is a seven day affair. Chinese people for miles around converged on the Pajaro Chinatown. This was the annual vacation for the workers. They came to renew old acquaintances and friendships, to visit relatives, and to participate in burning fireworks for good luck. They came to contribute money for the poor by giving to the collectors during the lion and dragon ceremonial dances. They enjoyed listening to the Chinese orchestras with the symbols and drums playing the Chinese songs, which brought back fond memories of their younger days in China. The colorful banners and lanterns along the streets and the seasonal delicacies of the banquets were a great treat for the hard-working Chinese immigrants.

To us youngsters this was the happiest days of our lives. Mother would dress us in colorful costumes, and along with Father, who was dressed in his best Chinese silken gown, we went from door to door to pay respects to the store owners and to every household in the community. The adults of the whole community had prepared little red packages containing 25¢ pieces, called li shee, to give to the children. It is an old legend that the giver of li shee on New Year's Day will have a lucky year. After a day's collection of these red packages, our pockets were usually quite full. In our early teens I remember my older brother, Gene, and I would open a few of these packages and race across the bridge to Trevethan's Tamale Parlor. There we would gorge ourselves with two or three beef tamales.

The other holiday that had the participation of all the immigrants was Ching Ming, the spring festival, and it was also called, the sweeping of the tombs. This is the time for commemorating the dead. Horses and buggy's, bicycles, and other modes of transportation carried most of the community to Whiskey Hill, where the Chinese cemetery was situated. The purpose of the trip was to pay respects to the dead by renewing the markers on the graves, planting greens and flowers, and making the area clean and beautiful. The ceremony at the gravesite included lighting red candles, burning incense, burning idol paper money, and shooting firecrackers to eliminate the demons and specters that may be around. A small amount of wine was poured in front of the gravesite and a feast for the dead and the guardian of the cemetery was spread out on the ground. When the dead had partaken, the living, who were waiting near, consumed the good food.

There were also many other holidays on the Chinese calendar, but they were not celebrated by these hard-working sojourners whose only purpose in life was to save enough money to return to China.

Now coming to the subject of food. Chop suey and chow mein have been advertised so much that many Americans think that these are the only food aside from rice that the Chinese people eat. Actually neither of these dishes are to be found in China. They are the American style Chinese food. The early settlers in these Chinatowns had different routines of eating than the American families. Your typical breakfast is at seven, with luncheon at noon, and dinner at six. But, as I mentioned before, the Chinese immigrants did not adopt your habits of eating, nor your routine. Their usual routine was breakfast at none, dinner at four, and a light snack before retiring.

Their menu was a very simple one. It consisted of salted fish, a fresh vegetable dish, somewhat like chop suey, Chinese sausages, salted pork, and eggs, and of course, rice. However, during celebrations and holidays, especially on Chinese New Year, the limitations were lifted. Banquets of every conceivable exotic dish were prepared. It would not be an overstatement to maintain that the Chinese are the best and most experienced cooks in the world. Chinese dishes can be reckoned in the thousands. Holiday banquets usually consist of bird's nest soup, or shark's fin soup, followed with lobster Cantonese, Peking duck, sweet and sour barbecued pork, and many other exotic dishes.

I hope that most of you have partaken of a Chinese banquet. If you have not, you should do so immediately because you will experience the supreme gastronomic treat of your life.

Another fascinating observation about the Chinese immigrant is that in spite of their decades of American cultural influence their food and eating habits up to the present day have changed very little.

The only concession that they make in the various Chinatowns is coffee and donuts for breakfast. Luncheon and dinner and snacks are still mostly Chinese food.

Now coming to the subject of the Chinese immigrants' view of education. It has been postulated that the Chinese have the greatest respect for education and therefore they would sacrifice anything to have their children educated. This however did not apply to the sojourners who came to America from the villages of China. Although these people theoretically valued education, their feelings for China were such that they could not fully accept American schooling. In the Pajaro Chinatown, there were two or three other Chinese families that had children. Perhaps there were three or four of them that graduated from grammar school, but they were then immediately sent to China for a Chinese education, which they thought was superior to ours. The dream of the sojourner was that his son would take over his established business in America and remit money to China when the sojourner retired there.

Fortunately for us our father was an exception. Thinking back it seems to me that his whole life was dedicated to one purpose, that of encouraging all of us, boys and girls alike, to have a complete and thorough education: high school, college, and graduate school. For that period of the century, this concept was an exceptional and rare one, whether the parent is Chinese or Caucasian.

Father maintained his courage and determination to carry on his ideals throughout the cycles of boom and depression that struck our country and economy from time to time.

During one cycle of depression when business was poor, and the family income meager, there was despair and pessimism among the children. Several times my brother Gene and I wanted to quit school, go to work, and help support the family. But when Father was confronted with any problems, especially with one presented by his foolish children, he would quote his sagacious and profound philosophy "Heaven brought us here, and Heaven will take care of us!" After discussing the pros and cons with us, he would always persuade us to go on with our schooling, and for that I am eternally thankful to him. In my own encounter with life's problems during the past fifty years, Father's philosophy has given me much comfort.

On March 20, 1933, I had graduated from Stanford Medical School and was practicing in San Francisco Chinatown when there was a catastrophic fire that enveloped and destroyed the Pajaro Chinatown. Some of the inhabitants had already moved away, others had returned to China, and many of them had moved across the bridge to the new Chinatown at the south end of Main Street. Only about one hundred old timers remained there. In spite of a severe cold, Father rushed down to help his old friends. He brought blankets, food, clothing and made coffee for the homeless. He continued without sleep long into the night to arrange for the comfort of his helpless and bewildered friends. He exhausted himself seeking shelter for them. The next day he was stricken with pneumonia. And nine days later, on March 31, 1933, at the age of 78, a wonderful man passed away. I am sure he went to Heaven.

It was in 1893 that Dong Ten Song participated in the birth of the new Pajaro Chinatown, and in 1933, exactly forty years later, he stood helpless and dejected watching his old home being consumed in an agonizing and fiery death. This no doubt contributed to his demise.

Recently Miss Harris sent me a Watsonville High School Principal's Newsletter dated May 3, 1971. There was a quotation from Ralph Waldo Emerson which states "An institution is but the lengthened shadow of a single man." I would like to add "...a single man and his wife" because behind every successful man is a woman. The lengthened shadows of Dong Ten Song and Dong Jade Pearl have inspired the creation on a rugged eminence of San Francisco's famous Telegraph Hill a nine-story building, The Telegraph Hill Towers. This structure was built by my brother's and sister's in commemoration of our parent's ideals and faith. At the entrance of the building, are engraved in concrete, twenty-seven stylized Chinese ideograms of the surname, Dong. Each ideogram representing one of their grandchildren. Their lengthened shadows have also inspired and perpetuated the appreciation of scholarship by their children and grandchildren. In only two generations they have produced a group of people among whom there are five Phi Beta Kappas, ten doctors of medicine, two pharmacists, two architects, three teachers, one dentist, one attorney, and many others in various professions.

In conclusion, on this day that we are celebrating the Declaration of Independence, I want to emphasize that this saga of the Dong Family could only happen in the village of Pajaro, in the State of California, and in our magnificent country, the United States of America.