

Royal Cafe:

50 YEARS ON MAIN STREET **PART 1 OF 6**



Eng/Ong/Wong family dinner in Royal Cafe in 1960. From left to right: Marjorie Fong Eng, Jimmy Eng, Lily & Michael Eng, unknown, Arthur Fong, Gan Ong, Gary Ong, May Ong, Allan Eng, Harry Eng, Jack Eng, who no doubt took the photo. One of his photos is on the wall. All five of the cafe owners are present: Jimmy, Gan, Allan, Harry, and Jack. Harry died a year later.

Federal Chinese Exclusion Acts

The Page Act of 1875 was the first federal law ever passed directed at a single ethnic group. It was a reaction to Chinese women coming to the U.S. to be prostitutes or concubines. If they had children while in the U.S., the children would automatically become U.S. citizens under the 14th Amendment, passed shortly after the end of the Civil War.

Beginning around 1850, as Oregon was being settled, Cantonese Chinese men began immigrating to Oregon seeking better paying jobs to support their families back in China. They came primarily from the Pearl River Delta in southeast China. In reaction to complaints that Chinese working for less pay brought down worker wages, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which banned the entry of Chinese laborers to the United States for 10 years. Chinese merchants, diplomats, professionals, and students were exempt.

In 1892, Congress passed the Geary Act, which renewed exclusion of Chinese laborers for an additional 10 years. Plus, it required every Chinese in the United States to carry a Chinese Certificate of Identity, which included a photo and a list of distinguishing physical characteristics, such as moles and scars. In 1902, the Chinese Exclusion law was renewed and made permanent. It was not repealed until 1943 as a gesture of goodwill to China, which was an ally of the U.S. fighting the Japanese during WWII. Chinese could emigrate to the U.S., but limited by a Congressional quota set at 105 Chinese persons per year.

The War Brides Act of Dec. 28, 1945, allowed alien spouses and natural and adopted children of members of the U.S. Armed Forces to enter the U.S. as non-quota immigrants after World War II. The Act expired in 1948.

■ Six-part series explores role of Chinese immigrants in Baker County history

By GARY DIELMAN

For the Baker City Herald

Editor's Note: This is the first in a six-part series of articles written by Gary Dielman, a longtime Baker County historian, that explores the vital role that Chinese immigrants played in the county's history. The series focuses on the families who owned the Royal Cafe on Main Street in Baker City from 1936 to 1990. The series will continue over the next six weeks, publishing in Saturday issues.

In 1935, five related Chinese businessmen from a small village in southeastern China came to Baker City after having engaged in business ventures in Walla Walla, Washington, and Pendleton. In Baker City they began by acquiring a second-story restaurant at 2009 Main St. called The Chinese Tea Garden. Soon they started a new restaurant at 1910 Main St. named Royal Café. That café remained under family ownership for more than half a century.

The operation of the Royal Café was unlike any other business in Baker City. The original five co-owners — Allan Eng (1900-1978), Harry Eng (1900-1961), Gan Ong (1902-1994), Jack Eng (1904-1972), and Jimmy Eng (1906-1982) — presumably shared equally in the profits.

All were married but lived like bachelors in small apartments above their café. Their wives continued living in China, sometimes for decades, due to U.S. immigration laws,

which since 1875 forbade Chinese women from coming to the U.S.

China's help in defeating Japan during World War II finally led to relaxation of the ban. Only then did the wives begin coming to Baker City to join their husbands, but that did not happen immediately, because the new law allowed only 105 Chinese to immigrate to the U.S. per year.

The Royal Café was a profitable business. After the end of WWII, as the owners' wives arrived, sometimes a decade or more later, the owners one after the other began buying or building houses, mostly in the affluent Grandview area of Baker City.

Eventually retirements and deaths brought great changes to the Royal Café business. By 1965 Jack Eng and Allan Eng were the last of the original five owners of the Royal Café still living in Baker City. Jack brought on board as co-owner his son, Henry Wong, who had worked in the business since coming from China to Baker City as a teenager in 1940. Jack and Henry expanded the Royal Café by adding the Shangrila Lounge and they started a sister Royal Café in Ontario.

When Jack died in 1972, Henry assumed the title President of the Royal Café, assisted by his wife, Annie Wong. In January 1978 Henry died at age 50. Succeeding Henry as President, Annie ran the café until 1990, when she sold the business and retired. She lives with a sister and niece in New Mexico.

Immigration

In the early 1800s, when Europeans arrived in the area we call Oregon, 60 Native American tribes had been the sole human occupants for over 12,000 years. All the rest of us Oregonians are immigrants or offspring of immigrants.

From its start in the early 1840s, more than 300,000 people emigrated to Oregon from other states and foreign countries following the "Emigrant Road," later known as the Oregon Trail. Although the Oregon Trail led the emigrants through future Baker County, no one settled anywhere in the eastern half of Oregon until the early 1860s. The eastern portion of Oregon was considered too far from markets in the populated area west of the Cascade Mountain Range, which was the actual goal of the slogan "Oregon or Bust."

Not until gold was discovered in October 1861 in future Baker County did nonnative settlement in Eastern Oregon begin. First came persons of European extraction, followed shortly thereafter by Chinese, mostly from Canton, China. Not long after Baker City was platted in 1865, a block-long area called Chinatown within a block of the business district sprang up on both sides of Auburn Avenue from Resort Street to Powder River.

On the very eastern edge of Baker City, Chinese residents established a cemetery, where they buried their loved ones temporarily. After about five years, under the supervision of a relative, friend, or the family association, they dug up the remains, dried the bones, and shipped them back to the cemetery of their home village in China.

By 1940, almost all Chinese residents had left Baker City's Chinatown. In the Chinese cemetery there remains a single granite tombstone. Today a small pagoda imported from China about a decade ago and an interpretive sign commemorate the former Chinese cemetery.

Downtown there exists not one Chinese building to remind one that Baker City's Chinatown ever existed. The predominant building in Baker City's former Chinatown is today the headquarters of the Baker City Police Department on Auburn Street next to Powder River, where the Chinese Joss house (Chinese temple) used



Baker County Library Historic Photo Collection

Royal Café exterior, northeast corner of Main & Court around 1960. The door between Royal Café and Kennedy Building has 1910½ Main address, led to the 2nd floor apartments.

to stand. Only old photos survive to document over 70 years of Baker City's lively Chinatown.

The demise of Chinatown was followed by Chinese restaurateurs choosing to set up businesses in Baker City. During the five decades covered by this six-part series, the number of restaurants in Baker City has remained

consistently around 15, including an average of two or three operated by immigrants from China.

Gracie Toy operated a restaurant in Baker from the 1930s until 1970. The Baker Café at 1826 Main St., operated by Mon Lee, wife Huie Fung Tan, and their four children, was a Chinese-run restaurant for 18 years (1940-

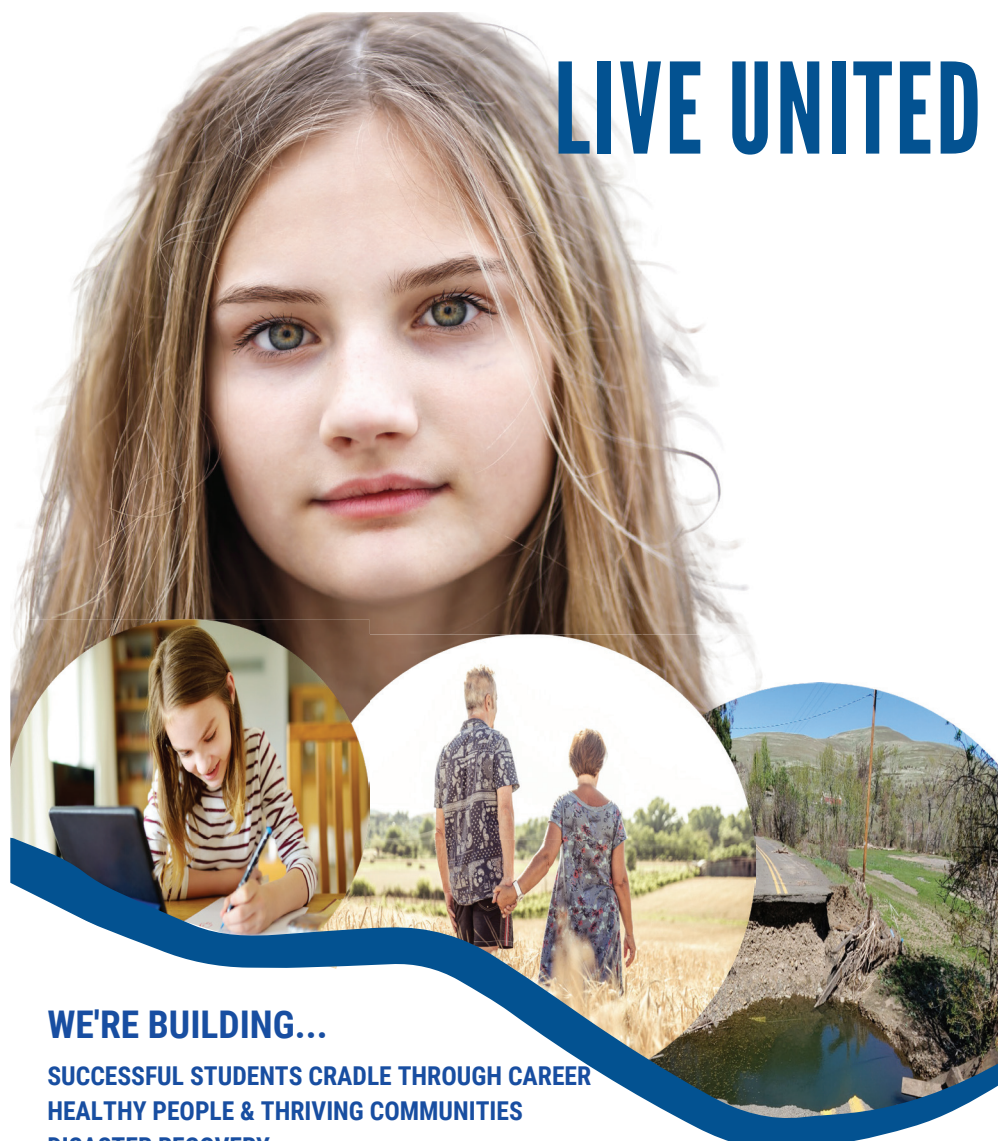
1958). After the Lee children graduated from Baker High School and moved to the San Francisco area, the parents soon followed.

The longest tenured Chinese restaurant was the Royal Café at 1910 Main St. The Royal Café and the Chinese restaurateurs who operated it for over 50 years are the focus of this series.



Baker County Library Historic Photo Collection

Grandfathers Lee and Eng holding infant twin grandsons Paul and Richard (or Richard and Paul), parents Gooley Eng and Faye Lee Eng and daughter, Mary Lou, oldest, Dorothy, youngest, not yet born. Birth years: 1948, 1949, 1950. Probably taken in Gooley and Faye's house at 1425 Court St.



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