Source: San Luis Obispo Fire Department: Souvenir of San Luis Obispo. June 1904

AH LOUIS,
Chinese Merchant, Palm and Chorro Streets.

Take a stroll (or two) into the past

SLO's old Chinatown is one of 12 county historic walks

By Dorie Bentley
Telegram-Tribune

HERITAGE AND Community Walk trekkers may get a chance to see a "sleeping dragon" when they tour Ah Louis' historic store. Opened in 1885 as the focal point of San Luis Obispo's Chinatown, the store at 800 Palm St. became a California State Historical Landmark in 1965.

The 1992 Heritage and Community Walk, which starts at 8:30 a.m. Saturday, May 9, commemorates the "rich and colorful history brought into San Luis Obispo by Chinese immigrants," said walk leader Dianne Timmerman.

Howard Louis, now 83, the youngest of eight Louis children, was born in living quarters upstairs over the store, and has operated the store more than 60 years.

Louis tagged himself a sleeping dragon as he related some of the history of the Chinese community to walk supporters during a luncheon in the General Hospital Annex.

Louis said the original store was a small wooden building his father built in 1874. It was later moved across the street to the current site of the Ming Low Restaurant by Ah Louis.

In early days, Ah Louis had more than 2,000 Chinese laborers working for him, said his son. He created his own brickyard and made the bricks that still decorate the historic building built in 1884.

Bricks from the Ah Louis yard also decorated the old courthouse, the railroad roundhouse, and many businesses.

Ah Louis' laborers also worked on the eight original tunnels of the Cuesta pass railroad grade. The 10-year job, considered one of the longest and most difficult of its time, opened rail traffic between Southern and Northern California.

The store that once sold Chinese herbs and coolie supplies became a major importer of Oriental goods in later years.

Howard Louis said the City Council decided in 1950 to "clean out Chinatown," and wanted to buy a 28-by-130-foot piece of property. The council offered $1.10 a square foot, which would have been about $3,000.

"I fought City Hall," said Louis, laughing at the memory. He said he aired his plight in newspapers and over the radio and "the whole town woke up."

"They got my Irish up," Louis joked. He went to a council meeting and, facing community outrage, council members decided not to buy the property.

"They unleashed a sleeping dragon," Louis said, smiling.

This is the Chinese Year of the Monkey, and a tiny monkey decorates 1992 Heritage and Community Walk buttons, which feature the Ah Louis store.

The 16-block walk takes in the store, a Chinese artifact display in the Palm Street garage, and the County Museum, and is one of 12 historic walks to be taken by walkers throughout the county.

Reservations are required for all walks and can be obtained by calling the RSVP office, 544-8740. All money raised by pledges goes to in-home support services for the frail, homebound elderly.

Ah Louis ... created his own brickyard and made the bricks that still decorate the historic building built in 1884.

New walks this year will include a Historic Creekside Tour along Mission Mall; a five-block walk through Arroyo Grande's Downtown Village, which takes in the historic Odd Fellows Hall, Olohan Building, swinging bridge and Hoosegow; and a 12-block walk to Santa Manuela School House, the last one-room schoolhouse in the county, and the Paulding House, built in 1889.

Other walks will be a 14-block tour of San Luis Obispo's historic homes and churches, a seven-block walk along Garden Street, a four-block tour of the County Museum and Children's Museum, and a 3- to 5-mile "Walk Lovers'" long walk around the perimeter of Cal Poly.

In the North County, a nine-block Atascadero Colony Heritage Walk tours Sunken Gardens, and a historic old fire house and printery building.

Paso Robles' Vine and Oak streets historical homes walk takes in 14 blocks of Victorian homes built in the late 1880s, and a 12-block Paso Robles downtown historic core.

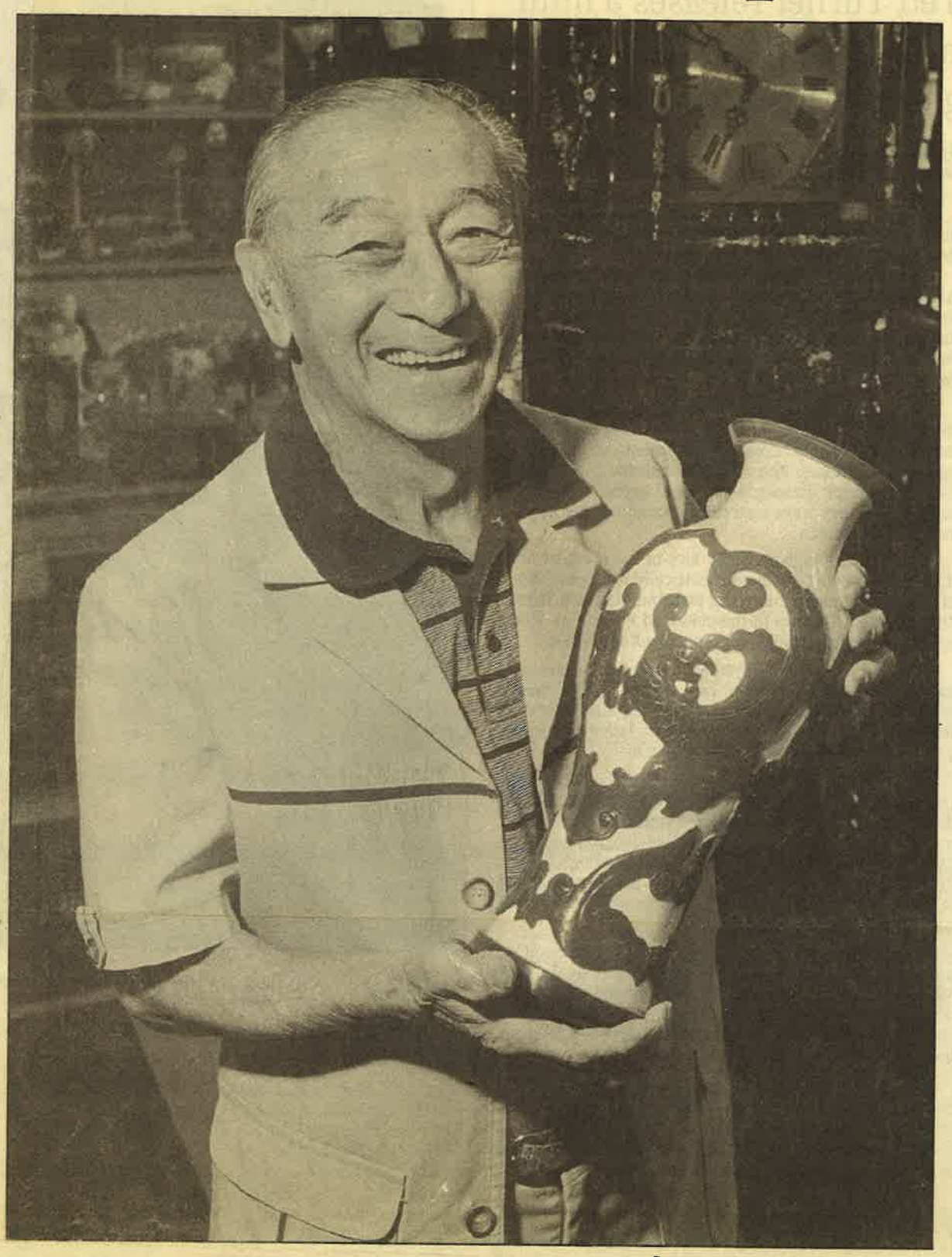
Award ceremonies will be held in Paso Robles, Atascadero, San Luis Obispo and Arroyo Grande after the walks.

Bronze medallions will be presented to the oldest and youngest participants; for the three largest pledges by individual participants; to top teams with the largest pledge amount per team, and for the greatest combined years of age of any one team.

After the walks, seniors, senior programs and others will be honored during an Older Americans' Luncheon at 12:30 p.m. in The Village, a senior retirement home at 55 Broad St., San Luis Obispo.

The public is welcome. Luncheon cost is $6, and reservations must be made in advance by calling 549-4836, or 1-800-834-3400.

The events are sponsored by Area Agency on Aging, Central Coast Commission for Senior Citizens, and Mentor Senior Health Network of San Luis Obispo General Hospital.



David Middlecamp/Telegram-Tribune

Howard Louis holds a Peking vase, one of many treasures a visitor to his store will discover.

Rambling guys and gals raised $11,000

Some 150 walkers of the 1991 fifth Heritage and Community Walk raised more than $11,000 for in-home support services for the frail, elderly homebound.

Isabel Lierman of San Luis Obispo, 93 years, 11 months, was honored as eldest participant. Nancy Stinchfield, 82, of Paso Robles, was second.

Youngest individual entrants were Jason Rodgers, 7, of Paso Robles, and Spencer Shultz, 8½, of San Luis Obispo.

Taking awards for greatest combined years of age of any one team was SeaShell Communities' Sassy Sand Dabs, who totaled 488 years.

Morro Magnificents from SeaShell won for greatest combined age spread of any team with an 88-year spread — from 1 year, 3 weeks to 89 years.

Six top teams bringing in the greatest amount of pledges were San Luis Obispo County Medical Auxiliary, $1,470; Caring Callers, $862; Cayucos Seniors Seagulls, $746; Pat Jackson Grads, $508; AARP No. 3213, $404; and Morro Bay Senior Aces, $313.

Three largest pledge amounts were raised by Arly Robinson of Cayucos Seagulls, $425; Opal Nelson, Cayucos Seagulls, $266; Julia Piquet, Caring Callers, $225; Pam Nargi, San Luis Obispo Medical Auxiliary, $230; Patricia Lawrence, San Luis Obispo Medical Auxiliary, $200; and Tina Karnafel, Williams Bros., $148.

Opal Nelson of Cayucos Seagulls raised the greatest number of pledges — 85. Jeanne Dugger of Paso Robles, Williams Bros., was second with 20.

— Dorie Bentley

Family Portrait:

THE LOUIS FAMILY

The Wit and Wisdom of the Wongs Brought to Our Town From a World Away

by Susan Stewart *

Over a century and a half has passed since a young Chinese bride carried incense, candles and offerings to her temple in a small village near Canton City in the Chinese province of Guangdong. Lok Shee had married into the large Wong family whose name dominated the village of Ock Gong Loong On. Her prayers for good health and a son were answered with the birth of a baby boy on February 20, 1840. His father named him "On" (meaning contented). Wong On represented the 138th generation of Wongs to be born in that village. "Little could he know that his child would one day become a pioneer of the American West" (from the book Gum Sahn Yun, by H. K. Wong).

Wong On left his home in China at 21, to escape "an unprecedented series of floods, droughts, famine ... peasant uprisings, and oppressive rulers" (H.K. Wong). He arrived in San Francisco in 1861 to begin a journey that would culminate in 75 years of astounding accomplishments. Much of the city of San Luis Obispo was both literally built and culturally shaped by the many talents and contributions of the man known to us as Ah Louis. Wong On suffered from asthma, which is why he chose San Luis Obispo as his home – the only place he found that eased his breathing. It was here that he established himself as a labor contractor, businessman, general merchandiser, importer, herbalist, brickyard owner, quicksilver miner and seed farmer. He was also renowned as an excellent cook, banker, arbitrator, mentor, teacher, husband and father.

Working first as a laborer himself, one of Wong On's first employers was Captain John Harford who recognized his leadership talents and quickly made him his right-hand man – with only one problem: Wong is a very common name. When Harford shouted for him, several Wongs came running. In order to separate Wong On from the rest, Captain Harford spotted a crate marked "San Luis Obispo" and immediately dubbed him Ah Luis (the "Ah" being a genderless prefix for Chinese names denoting politeness). "Documents show that Wong On wrote his name 'Ah Luis' at first. Later he added the 'o' to spell 'Louis' and pronounced it 'Lou-ee'" (H.K. Wong).

In 1872, Ah Louis established the first brick yard, using time-honored Chinese methods to make the bricks used to build some of our most treasured landmarks: the Andrews block, the Sinsheimer building, the Hall of Records, and a wing of the Mission. "Ah Louis bricks have withstood earthquakes and the elements for over a century" (H.K.Wong). Those same bricks were used to rebuild the original wooden general merchandise store he had opened in 1874 on the corner of Palm and Chorro streets, a store he soon outgrew. So he moved the wooden one to a location across the street (where Mee Heng Low Restaurant is now) and built the one which still stands today. It was there that he ran the family business: contracting thousands of Chinese laborers to work on the railroads; importing the rice and other essentials for sale to locals and Chinese alike; and serving as banker and mediator for many.

It was there, too, that he raised his family. In 1889 he met the beautiful Eng Gon Ying (which means Silver Dove) on a business trip to San Francisco. He married her a year

Lena, Mae and Young Louis. circa 1900

Ah Louis - 1935 (above)
Mrs. Ah Louis, Gon Ying, 1908.

Gon Ying *"Silver Dove"* — Mrs. Ah Louis

The children of Ah Louis: (L-R)Walter, George, Helen, Mae, Young, Lena, Howard and Fred. circa 1970.

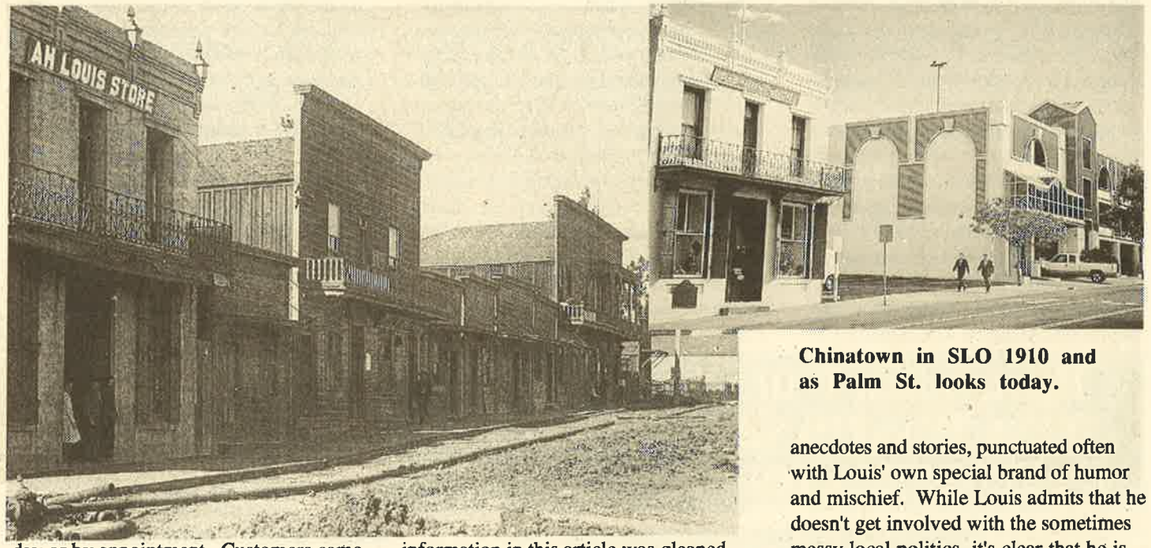
Howard Louis with JoAnn Watson Wong (great-granddaughter of Ah Louis) 1996.

Howard Louis - 1932

later and together they raised eight children - all born and housed in the small space above the store. Howard Louis, the only surviving child today, recalled his boyhood fondly in a recent conversation held in the historic store now run by Howard ("Toby") and his wife of 55 years, Yvonne.

"Please sit," Louis suggested, pointing to a small, gracefully shaped drumstool of highly polished rosewood, fancifully inlaid with mother of pearl. I sat – carefully. The store is only open a few hours each day or by appointment. Customers came and went during our talk, gazing in awe at the chock-a-block Chinese art, curios, figurines, fine jade carvings and tapestries filling every square inch of available surface. Louis is a strong, youthful man, whose easy laughter, quick wit, and sharp memory belie his 88 years. Much of the information in this article was gleaned from that brief conversation and from two video-taped talks. The energetic and outspoken Louis was asked to speak at the Art Center's recent Chinese Exhibit Opening, and for a class of Cal Poly students. Those talks, and our conversation, were full of colorful anecdotes and stories, punctuated often with Louis' own special brand of humor and mischief. While Louis admits that he doesn't get involved with the sometimes messy local politics, it's clear that he is quite passionate about some things.

"You never want to kick a sleeping dragon," I heard him say to a local artist who had wandered into the store. The artist, inquiring about the mural project planned for the side wall of the parking structure adjacent to the store, was warned



Chinatown in SLO 1910 and as Palm St. looks today.

Howard & Yvonne Louis - 1992

Howard W. Louis
黃鐘燊

that the project could become controversial. In an aside to me, Louis stressed that the mural, originally planned to depict the history of the Chinese community in our town, should also include the heritage of Mexicans and Native Americans. "Let's not forget about those people," he said, identifying with their struggle and the shared oppression, discrimination and bigotry they have all endured. Louis sits on the committee designated to select the artist and the design for the mural. When the work begins, it will not be without Howard Louis' stamp of approval.

Like his father before him, Louis is a man of many talents. Born the youngest of the eight Ah Louis children in 1908, he lost his lovely mother when he was just a baby. Howard was raised by Japanese, Spanish and English-speaking babysitters, his older brothers and sisters, as well as his brother Young's wife, Stella. Today, he is multi-lingual, and enjoys speaking to Spanish and Chinese patrons.

Though his father spent much of his time overseeing the family farms and other enterprises, Howard remembers that Ah Louis still did most of the cooking. One entire wall of the store was divided into small drawers where he kept herbs, both medicinal and for cooking. Chinese tradition dictates that the oldest members of the family get first choice from the dinner platter. His father often cooked fried chicken and Howard quipped, "I was twelve years old before I knew that chickens had anything but necks and wings!"

Howard grew up to be a track star in grammar and high school, winning numerous medals and state awards; and he was also captain of his high school football team. Later, he was one of a select few to be accepted to the newly created International House at Berkeley, where he studied economics, with transportation as a specialty. He has been a movie projectionist, a prop man, rare coin collector, and even taught flower arranging: "Just one of my many facets," he laughed.

His seven brothers and sisters were a great influence on Howard. Each led fascinating, successful lives – requiring and deserving separate articles of their own. Lena, the oldest, led a sheltered life in San Luis before journeying East to Chicago where she met and married a wealthy restauranteur. There, she led an affluent life, devoting much of her time to charity and serving on the board of directors of the Chinese America Council of Chicago.

Young Louis was born next and grew up to be very active in show business, both as a movie projectionist (for Hearst, among others), and as a stage manager. He married Stella (Chandler) in 1913 and had one daughter, Elsie. Young and Stella also helped to establish the San Luis County Historical Society in the 1950s.

Young's sister, Mae, was next in line and Howard recalls that she helped her father with all his correspondence. Like many of the Louis children, she spoke Spanish and Chinese before learning English. In 1914, she married a San Franciscan named Ed Watson. Together they raised two boys, Edward Jr., and William ("Billy") Watson.

Walter and George Louis were the musicians in the family, playing several instruments each, and singing with a quartet at very young ages. Walter's astonishing shorthand and typing skills turned him into an excellent accountant and George went on to tour in vaudeville. George later graduated from the Julliard Institute of Music and wound up writing singing commercials for NBC. Their sister, Helen, also became a musician, learning to sing and dance as a child. She later joined her sister, Lena, in Chicago where she starred in vaudeville with her brother, George, touring throughout America. Later in life, Helen was honored as the second Chinese name added to the Chicago Hall of Fame for her service to the Chicago American Civic Council.

Fred Louis, born just before Howard in 1907, put his excellent scientific mind to work for Ford Motor Company as an automotive engineer. He later joined the U.S. Army, distinguishing himself in Korea, in Germany, and finally as a member of the U.S. Military Advisory Group in Taiwan before being sent to the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. for assignment to a position with Chief of Staff, General Lawton Collins. He left the army as a full bird Colonel and in retirement, became a collector of fine Chinese art.

When Howard was 24, his father decided to return to the home village in China where he planned to spend his remaining days. And so, in 1932, at 92 years of age, accompanied by two of his sons, Ah Louis set sail for his homeland. Howard and his brother, Fred, prepared the way and helped their father through the arduous journey. They carried him by sedan chair part of the time but Howard said that the frequent jumps from launch boats to ferries were difficult. The party commemorating the triumphant return and 93rd birthday of Wong On/Ah Louis lasted four days. Eight pigs, 1500 chickens, 600 ducks and four goats were cooked and eaten by guests in shifts, with an orchestra playing all the while. Roving bands of criminals caught wind of the famous family and it was rumored they would be kidnapped for ransom. "We left the village the next morning and each of us slept in a different home so they couldn't get us all at one time!" said Howard.

Ah Louis' success in America led to some significant contributions to his home village in China; among them a school, and five other small businesses. Despite his honored place in that society, Ah Louis grew restless, disappointed with the still primitive conditions there. He soon asked to be returned to San Luis and his beloved family there. Howard loves to tell the humorous tale of that return. It seems Ah Louis left for China without benefit of a passport, leading to a case of suspicious identity as he attempted to return to this country. Before leaving Canton, a consulate representative quizzed Ah Louis about the prices of American commodities (tomatoes, sugar, coffee, etc.) to be sure he was not an impostor. Even when they finally arrived in San Francisco Bay, he was detained and questioned at Angel Island for three days before being allowed to return to San Luis. Howard said that were it not for the intervention of San Luis Obispo's mayor, Louis Sinsheimer and California's governor Hiram Johnson, he may never have made it home. Upon their return, Howard ran the store until his father's death three years later at the age of 96.

Howard then joined the World War II effort. The U.S. Army decided he could best serve the military in counter intelligence so he was sent to Stanford University for a crash course in Chinese and Far East Culture. He was eventually assigned to the 89th Division where he saw front line action under General George Patton. Despite his age (32), he could outrun and outperform most of the teenagers and 20-year-olds he had been training and fighting with. When doctors discovered his age during regular medical checkups, they repeatedly asked him what he was doing there. His standard answer was, "I've been asking that same question for the last 10,000 miles!"

When the war ended, Howard returned to San Luis to run the store, becoming the family historian. Today, he enjoys fishing and traveling often with his wife, Yvonne. He keeps the store open to greet old friends and new visitors who seek out the landmark that was registered by the State of California in 1965. Howard "Toby" Louis presides proudly over the monument and legacy left by his father – a lifetime of astonishing ingenuity and achievement that began with the modest prayers of a young bride a world away from here. *

**I wish to acknowledge H.K. Wong, author of Gum Sahn Yun, from which much of the information for this article was obtained.*

contains several progressive passages that ironically give no indications of the anti-Asian legislation that would follow in the coming decades. Under the terms of the agreement, the United States and China recognized

> the inherent and inalienable right of man to change his home and allegiance, and also the mutual advantage of the free migration and emigration of their citizens and subjects, respectively for purposes of curiosity, of trade, or as permanent residents. . . . Chinese subjects visiting or residing in the United States, shall enjoy the same privileges, and exemptions in respect to travel or residence, as may there be enjoyed by citizens or subjects of the most favored nation [HarpWeek 1998–1999a].

Although the treaty encouraged immigration and protected the liberties of Chinese living in the United States, it did not extend them the right of naturalization.

4.3.2 Beginnings of the Chinese Enclave in San Luis Obispo, 1870–1880

Of the 59 Chinese living in the county in 1870, at least a few were engaged in fishing (Ochs 1970). Abalone was plentiful along the Central Coast, and dried seafood bound for China was one of California's largest exports during the 1870s and 1880s (Parker & Associates 2006; Tognazzini 1989:85). Some of the Chinese worked as agricultural laborers and cooks, while others found employment in the Santa Cruz quicksilver mine later in the decade.

In some ways, Wong On was much like the typical Chinese migrant. He had landed in California in 1860 seeking his fortune in the gold fields and afterward worked in a general merchandise store in Corvallis, Oregon, where the owner dubbed him "Ah Louis," a moniker he carried throughout the rest of his life. He arrived in San Luis Obispo in 1870 and temporarily took a job as a cook for the French Hotel (Ochs 1970:26). Recognizing his business acumen, local entrepreneurs John Harford, William Beebe, and L. Schwartz retained Ah Louis' services as a labor contractor. Historical accounts differ as to when this partnership began: Krieger (1988:76) states that the businessmen had formed an association as early as 1868 and that Ah Louis had furnished the workers for the construction of the San Luis Obispo-San Simeon Road in 1870, whereas Ochs (1970:25) notes that Ah Louis' labor crews were first used to build Harford's Wharf and a connecting narrow-gauge railroad to Avila in the early 1870s.

This modest horse-drawn short line eventually grew into an extensive regional steam-powered railroad. After the completion of his wharf in 1873, Harford and his fellow investors set out to extend the railroad to San Luis Obispo, and Ah Louis had imported 160 Chinese workers from San Francisco for this purpose (Ochs 1970:26). However, in 1875–1876, a group of San Francisco investors, later organized as the Pacific Coast Steamship Company, purchased Harford's Wharf and existing narrow-gauge line. Using experienced Chinese work gangs, the steamship company completed the Avila-to-San Luis Obispo route in 1876. Under the ownership of the Pacific Coast Railway Company (PCRC), which had assumed control of the railroad in 1882, the line was lengthened from San Luis Obispo to Los Alamos in 1883 and ultimately to Los Olivos in 1887. In 1883, the line between Port Hartford and Avila was replaced (Best 1992:24–41). Chinese laborers were employed for construction on each leg of the railroad. Although it is not certain if Ah Luis provided workers to the PCRC since other Chinese labor contractors were also operating in San Luis Obispo County, his crews did help construct the Paso Robles-Cambria county road and the stage routes over the steep Cuesta Grade during the mid-

1870s (Leonard n.d.; Ochs 1970:26; Tognazzini 1991:23). Throughout the 1870s, Ah Louis had diversified his interests. In addition to labor contracting, he had opened a general merchandise store at the corner of Palm and Chorro streets; his brick yard on the west side of town supplied the bricks for the construction of the town's new courthouse in 1873 (Leonard n.d.).

The ability of Ah Louis and his fellow contractors to mobilize a large, unified, and inexpensive workforce on short notice was a boon to local capitalists. For the very same reasons, the Chinese were the scourge of the American-born common laborer. From 1870 to 1890, the population of California more than doubled from 560,000 to 1.2 million. As competition for jobs became more of an issue, anti-Chinese sentiment grew more prevalent. That sentiment was galvanized by the Workingmen's Party of California. Established in 1877, the party in fact advocated a progressive and diverse platform that called for, among other reforms, 8-hour work days, direct election of U.S. Senators, compulsory education, an improved monetary system, abolition of contract labor on public works, state regulation of banks and industry, and a more equitable taxation system (Ochs 1970:40–41). Nevertheless, the group was vehement in its opposition to cheap foreign labor and unsuccessfully attempted to amend the California State Constitution to place severe restrictions on the work opportunities for the Chinese in 1878. Slogans and catch phrases like "the Chinese must go" or the "Chinese blight" were commonly voiced by party members, including those of the local San Luis Obispo chapter. At times, verbal hostility escalated into violence, as in 1877 when agitators plundered San Francisco's Chinatown during a two-day riot. Ultimately, the overall agenda of the Workingmen's Party proved to be too radical for California's establishment, and the party lost its influence by the early 1880s. Yet the anti-Chinese movement aroused by the workers organization was to resonate among the voting public for the next several decades. In 1879 a special statewide election resulted in a near unanimous decision to ban Chinese immigration; in San Luis Obispo, only four votes were tallied for immigration (Ochs 1970:43). The issue had become a political reality that elected officials could not ignore.

Such antagonism was not limited to immigration or labor issues. In many towns, Chinese laundries similarly became a lightening rod for American contempt, although unlike the threat posed by cheap Chinese labor, which eventually resulted in the passage of exclusionary statutes, the controversies surrounding washhouses typically remained at a community-specific level. The first Chinese laundries in San Luis Obispo were established in the early 1870s (Leonard n.d.). An 1874 map of downtown does not specify structures as laundries or washhouses, but a group of buildings at the south corner of Morro and Palm streets is marked "Chinese."

The Chinese laundry uproar was fueled by a mixture of business competition mixed with xenophobia. In 1876, a *Tribune* advertisement announcing Mrs. M. E. Sutherland's new laundry urged residents to express their "Opposition to Chinese," and "patronize White Industry and Save Money" (Ochs 1970:20). The notice clearly implies that Chinese washhouses solicited white customers and did not solely operate within their own ethnic community. The Sutherland laundry apparently failed for lack of support, suggesting that while at least some of the town's citizens frequently appeared intent on ridding San Luis Obispo of the foreign washhouses, the pocketbooks of most residents said quite the opposite.

4.3.3 San Luis Obispo Chinatown, 1880–1900

Meanwhile, a bustling Chinatown was emerging within the town of San Luis Obispo (Figure 4-11). Sanborn Fire Insurance Company maps from the late 1880s and early 1890s indicate that numerous shops, laundries, and restaurants occupied the district, which was centered on Palm Street between Chorro and Morro streets. In 1890 the Chinese in San Luis Obispo numbered 284 or a little less than 10 percent of the total population (Ochs 1970:19).

As the unofficial mayor of Chinatown, Ah Louis served as the prime liaison with the rest of the community as well as the arbiter of disputes among his countrymen. The 1880s were a particularly busy period for Ah Louis. In 1881 he purchased a parcel on the north corner of Chorro and Palm streets. One year later he undertook the reclamation of land in Lake Laguna,

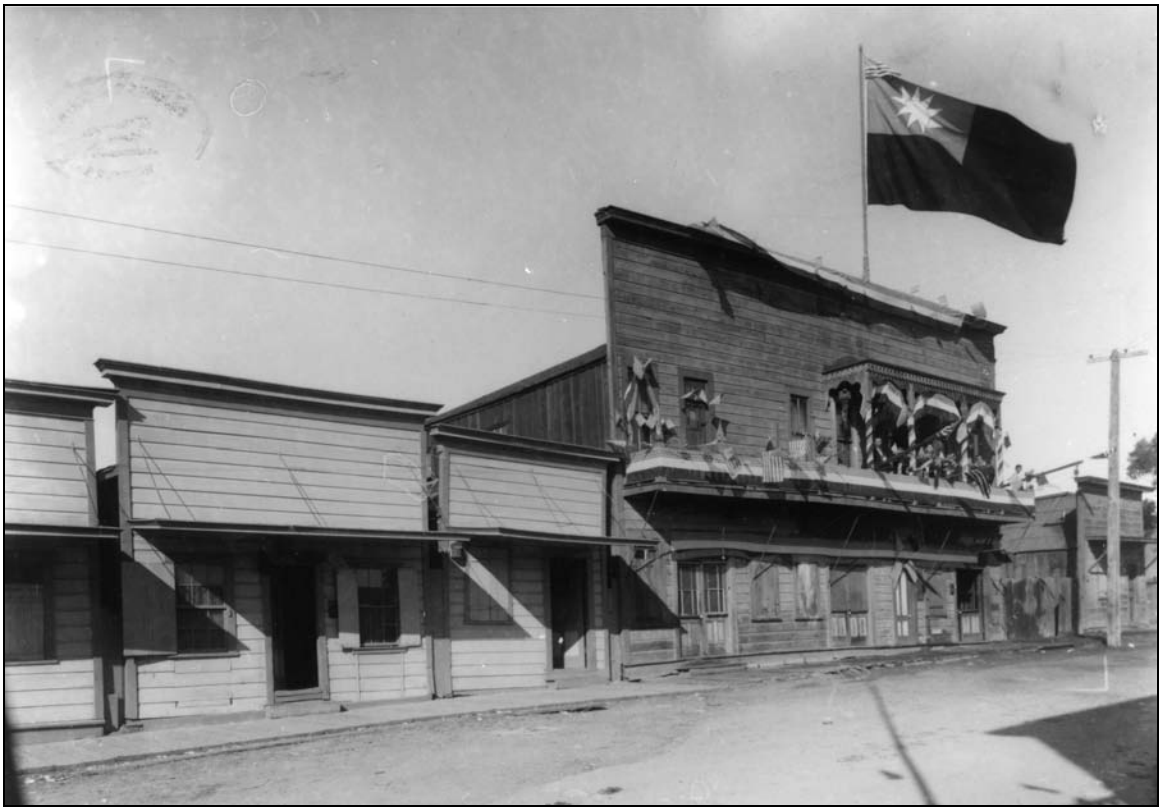


Figure 4-11 San Luis Obispo Chinatown circa 1900 (courtesy of SLOCHS).

presumably for agricultural purposes. In 1885 he acquired a parcel near the south corner of Chorro and Palm streets (Parcel 2 in the current project area) and moved his original store to this lot. The same year, using bricks from his own yard, Ah Louis built a two-story structure across the street on his initial plot, where it still stands as one of the town's historical landmarks. In 1889, Louis married Gon Yin in San Francisco. She bore him eight children, all born and raised in San Luis Obispo (Leonard n.d.; Ochs 1970:26–27).

More than any of his diverse endeavors, Ah Louis's most valuable asset—both commercially and socially—was his ability to reach out and cultivate the entire community of San Luis Obispo. Each Christmas, he marketed Asian goods as gifts to his non-Chinese customers and even

decorated his store to mark the season. A month or two later, the Chinese would literally ring in their New Year with the ear-piercing explosions of firecrackers and the loud clatter of the Celestial band, all meant to drive away the evil spirits for another year. The event attracted the participation of various elements of the broader community. With tongue-in-cheek, the *Tribune* chided:

> A petition to hang the man who invented the toot horn, would have got thousands of signatures last night. Every boy in town had one, or else a devil's fiddle, and the Chinese were nowhere in comparison. Mr. Tom Pattison was largely responsible for the row, having sold six dozen horns during the afternoon, but the other storekeepers were not much less to blame. The new born 1891 has lungs of brass and ought to make a stir in the work [Tognazzini 1991:1].

The New Year's celebration typically centered at Ah Louis store and across the street at the establishment of Yee Chung, who was the second most influential member of Chinatown.

Funerals offered the general public another, although more solemn, window into Chinese culture. In May 1889, a lengthy article in the *Tribune* described the last rites of Lee Gun, attended by many of the town residents. Significantly, the account was neither condescending nor patronizing in its tone and captured the details of the ritual with the precision of an ethnographer. The author concluded his entry by stating "On the whole it was a grand affair, and we have no recollection in our thirty or forty years of life in California of seeing it excelled" (Tognazzini 1989:74).

The raucous atmosphere of New Year's and the somber ritual of the funeral ceremony were, of course, only part of Chinatown's image. There was its seedier side, which, at least from a historical perspective, was perhaps more representative of the immigrant experience than the more reputable events. However, for many of the town's citizens seeking to attract new residents and investments for San Luis Obispo, this vice-ridden corner of the city was an eyesore. While there were instances of violence between Chinese and whites as well as within the ethnic community itself (Toganzzini 1990:124, 1998:52), most crimes reported by the *Tribune* in the 1890s involved opium use, gambling, or prostitution. Although the federal restriction and prohibition of opium began in the early 1900s, police raids on opium dens occur before the turn of the century, indicating that the City of San Luis Obispo had an ordinance banning the sale and possibly the use of the narcotic. Some of these busts involved white clients, who, along with their Celestial dealers, were brought before the court to face the charges (Tognazzini 1993:124, 1994:111). Gambling has historically been a favorite pastime among the Chinese, but here too, the inhabitants of Chinatown at times ran afoul of the law (Tognazzini 1995:78, 36–37). From newspaper accounts, the game of choice appears to have been *fan tan*. In this casino-like game, the banker or croupier extracts, four at a time, beans, coins, or other small articles from a bowl with an unknown quantity; prior to the removal, the players bet on what the remaining number (1, 2, 3, or 4) will be once the bowl has been reduced to four items or less. In the 1880s and 1890s, Chinatown lay just west of a series of female boarding houses, known as the town's red light district. It is not clear in what manner and to what extent the Chinese residents of San Luis Obispo were involved with prostitution. An 1897 *Tribune* article tells the tragic story of Fong Sing, a young woman who was sold to a brothel in San Luis Obispo by her newlywed husband and later freed by the superintendent of the Chinese Mission and Rescue Home of San Francisco (Tognazzini 1997:17). Another brief entry from the following year notes the arrest of an alleged madam, who is identified as a "denizen of Chinatown" (Tognazzini 1998:81).

The demographic make-up of Chinatown explains much about these illicit activities; the majority of Chinese were single males, who, several thousand miles from home, were less encumbered by the obligations and restrictions of their extended families. Very few woman accompanied men during the initial wave of immigration, and in 1880 the ratio of male to female Chinese immigrants in the United States was approximately 20:1 (Holiday 1999:213; U.S. National Archives and Records Administration 2006). Given the difficulties of entering the country, it is doubtful that many wives or prospective brides came over after 1882. Consequently, aside from Ah Louis and other wealthy businessmen, many Chinese male immigrants simply did not have the opportunity to marry, raise a family, and live a more settled life. From 1869 to 1894, the *Tribune* records only four weddings of Chinese residents (Ochs 1970:10).

4.3.4 Chinese Labor and Businesses

Many citizens who opposed Chinese businesses saw the Chinese laundries as an easy target. These businesses were present throughout the city and provided a great deal of income for members of the Chinese community. The City Council had passed a new fire ordinance effective January 1, 1880 that essentially sought to remove the washhouses and prevent the construction of similar business on Higuera Street. It is very likely that the content of the new ordinance was justified as the laundries did constitute a fire risk. After completing his inspection one month earlier, the fire warden reported that "certain Chinese keep fires burning day and night; that their places are surrounded by buildings of inflammable materials and in positions where it would be impossible to reach in case of fire" (Ochs 1970:21). Even years later, the combustible nature of these business continued to be a problem. Citing numerous specific fire hazards (e.g., lamps without wicks, unsecured lamps, etc.), the *Tribune* commented that "it will be very singular indeed if some day the whole of Chinatown is not wiped out by fire" (Tognazzini 1995:21). Although no such calamity ever struck San Luis Obispo, a conflagration ignited by an overturned lamp in a washhouse would have consumed the nearby town of Cambria had it not been for a heavy shower that extinguished the blaze (Tognazzini 1998:14).

Rather, it was the implementation of the ordinance that belied the real intent of the City Council; that is, the law was to be enforced immediately with no grace period to conform to the new code. Judge Venable interceded on behalf of the Chinese by asking for a delay in the enforcement of the ordinance and arguing that the removal of a legitimate business license is unjust and would result in a loss of income to the owners who rent these properties out (Ochs 1970:21). This tact by the City Council was apparently unsuccessful in eradicating the washhouses, and three years later it raised the quarterly license fee for laundries (Ochs 1970:22). The Chinese laundrymen not only refused to pay the excessive sum but closed their doors just before the July 4th celebration, forcing the town's residents to wash their own clothes. The City mandated that the delinquent washhouses pay a fine or face imprisonment and labor on public works. The court ruled that the City had exceeded its authority by ordering prisoners to work, but ultimately it appears the laundries either had to move their businesses out of town or, more likely, pay the exorbitant license fees.

In 1886, the town's anti-Chinese faction reverted to its original strategy of establishing a white laundry in San Luis Obispo, and with $1,000 in public subscriptions, C. H. Weaver opened his Caucasian Steam Laundry, offering pick-up services via wagon. By this time, the Chinese were no doubt emboldened by the inability of the town to remove them, legally or otherwise, from the

city limits. A *Tribune* article 15 years afterward recounts that the Chinese laundrymen responded to this competition by uniformly dropping their prices and thus driving the white washhouse out of business (Tognazzini 2001:112). The Chinese laundries were not restricted to their quarter of the city; an 1889 advertisement in the *Tribune* announced the opening of the Hen Lee Wash House on Monterey Street opposite the Pavillion, a location that was well outside the domain of Chinatown (Tognazzini 1989:36).

In contrast to the local success of the Chinese laundries and other businesses in San Luis Obispo, the Chinese laborer at large did not fair nearly as well during the 1880s and 1890s. These decades saw a complete reversal of the tenor expressed by the Burlingame Treaty as well as the passage of a series of anti-Chinese statues at the national level that were upheld by the Supreme Court. The sentiment against immigration that had been mounting since the 1870s was realized in the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, which barred the entry of Chinese laborers for a period of 10 years. Successive legislation further restricted travel and the liberties of Chinese immigrants. Passed in 1888, the Scott Act banned the return of Chinese workers leaving the county; this excluded the reentry of approximately 20,000 Chinese who had temporarily left the United States for China (HarpWeek 1998–1999b). In 1892 Congress approved the Geary Act, which extended the amended provisions of the 1882 Exclusion Act for another 10 years and provided for an internal identification system, whereby Chinese workers were required to carry a certificate of residence. An 1894 article in the *Tribune* reported the arrival of a Mr. Arnold who was to carry out the registration process in San Luis Obispo; the paper further observes that although the Geary Act applied to laborers, Chinese merchants were seeking certificates "to avoid arrest as a suspected laborer" (Tognazzini 1994:11–12). Significantly, the law defines a merchant as a buyer and seller of goods at a fixed location, thus categorizing laundrymen and peddlers as laborers and subjecting them to the stipulations of the act.

The exclusionary acts turned off the flow of cheap labor into the United States and thus represented a major victory for the country's labor interests. For most of the 1880s in California, however, the Chinese were still an important source of workers for the railroads. From 1861 to 1901, the Southern Pacific Railroad (SPRR) built the Coast Line, a 470-mile railway linking San Francisco with Los Angeles (Signor 1994). The rail line, which was an immense undertaking requiring several episodes of construction, was particularly important to San Luis Obispo and the rest of the Central Coast since it provided this previously isolated region better connectivity with the nation. For many years, the railway from San Francisco extended only to Soledad, but in the mid-1880s the SPRR made a major push southward. With at least 1,500 Chinese employed, the Coast Line reached Templeton by 1886; in January 1889, using 800 Chinese and one gang of white laborers, the SPRR continued the track to Santa Margarita, less than 10 miles from San Luis Obispo (Ochs 1970:34; Signor 1994:12).

After a four-year delay, construction resumed on the formidable Cuesta Grade in late 1892, and in May 1894 the Coast Line finally rolled into San Luis Obispo. Whether Chinese laborers worked on the grade has been a point of contention among local historians. Citing documented evidence, E. T. Strobridge (1996) states that "from August 13, 1890 all new road building was done by contractors who did not use the Chinese gangs that had been so successfully used since 1865." *Tribune* articles from the 1890s and early 1900s noted that while the SPRR at times considered hiring Chinese rail workers, only Chinese cooks were employed (Tognazzini 1993:45, 2000:8). Daniel Krieger (1996a, 1996b) has countered this view by emphasizing an oral

tradition of residents—including Howard Louis (1980), youngest son of Ah Louis—that confirms Chinese participation on the Cuesta Grade. He additionally casts doubt on the newspaper accounts of Benjamin Brooks, who served as *Tribune* editor during the construction of the Coast Line through San Luis Obispo. Krieger contends that given the town's sentiments against Chinese laborers and Brook's advocacy of the railroad, he falsely reported that no Chinese were working on the Cuesta Grade to put the SPRR in the best possible light. Biased or bogus media coverage was (and remains) a reality that should be addressed by historians as appropriate. However, because such accusations of deliberate deception assert a departure from the normal mode of historical documentation, they ultimately require more than just the recognition of a motive to support their veracity. The business documents and correspondences of Ah Louis, which were recently donated to the Cal Poly Special Collections Department, may go a long way in settling this question, although many papers are written in Chinese script and have yet to be thoroughly examined.

Whatever the exact timing, it appears that the Chinese as a group had withdrawn from the construction of the Coast Line sometime in the 1890s. Considering their impact on the quantity and quality of Chinese labor, the exclusionary statues assuredly contributed to the estrangement of the Chinese from the SPRR workforce. As early as January 1889, shortly after the Coast Line had reached Santa Margarita, there are indications of a rift between the railroad and the Chinese workers, who were looking to increase their daily wage of $1.10. The *Tribune* reported:

> In view of cessation of Chinese immigration it is understood that they will probably demand $1.50 a day which they won't get and they will be replaced by white labor. We understand white laborers stand ready to work at the higher rate [quoted in Ochs 1970:34].

The migrant rail worker of the late 1880s had been in the country for several years and apparently was not willing to toil away at little more than $1 a day, especially when his experience possibly afforded him other opportunities. Conversely, a freshly landed immigrant typically would take on even the most unsavory job for minimal wages just to gain a foothold in the county, yet his presence in the workforce was eliminated by the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. It seems that the Chinese immigrant had improved his lot to a point where he was less inclined to accept unconditionally the nominal wages of the railroad and, in fact, demanded to be compensated in line with the white laborer. From the SPRR's standpoint, the acknowledged diligence of the Chinese did not outweigh the higher labor costs or the public backlash caused by employing a large number of Chinese.

4.3.5 Anglo Attitudes toward Chinese Immigrants in San Luis Obispo

Chinese immigrants as a group elicited various responses from their American hosts, depending mainly, although not solely, on the presence and intensity of Sino-Anglo competition in the local and/or national economy. For a time, the railroads and possibly other industrials tacitly welcomed and encouraged the immigration of Chinese, but one would be very hard pressed to find any white resident on the West Coast during the late nineteenth century who would be willing to publicly declare the virtues of the Chinese immigrant and lobby for his continued presence in the county. Thus, the continuum of Anglo attitudes toward the Chinese ranged from reserved tolerance on the one hand to outright belligerence on the other.

Compared to other communities in the county, the City of San Luis Obispo saw few instances, if any, of raw aggression toward the Chinese. This was not the case in other communities. In 1879 a Chinaman living in San Miguel was drug from his home in the middle of the night and "accidentally" shot; the incident prompted the remainder of the Chinese to leave the town (Ochs 1970:44). In Arroyo Grande, an anti-Chinese cabal, the so-called "Improvement Club," made a practice of pressuring store owners and farmers to discharge Chinese works in favor of white laborers; another time, the group ushered a Chinese railroad gang out of town with threats of hanging (Ochs 1970:45–46; Tognazzini 1996:47). An 1897 *Tribune* article entitled "The Arroyo Grande Ku Klux" relates the beating, robbery, and destruction of property of two Chinese farmers by masked assailants (Tognazzini 1997:97). Organized labor in the United States has historically argued that at times hard-line tactics have unfortunately been necessary to advance the interests of the American worker. Yet the instances of brutality and intimidation described above appear to have been motivated by unadulterated racism, not so much by a concern for job preservation. However, job preservation seems to have been a driving force in San Luis Obipso.

In 1890, one David Taylor lodged a complaint against a group of Chinese for keeping hogs in the city limit. A fine was levied against the hog owners, who duly paid the sum. Further examination of the facts of the case by the city attorney led the courts to recant their initial decision; it became apparent that Taylor's complaint was motivated not by any nuisance caused by the pigs but because the Chinamen had been competing with Taylor in the collection of garbage. In his public explanation of the case, City Attorney J. M. Wilcoxon states that:

> the Chinamen he (Taylor) complained of were collecting swill for hog feed, also, and thus competing with him for garbage, which he did not want any Chinaman to do. I told him that the city ordinances were not passed or intended for the purpose of giving anybody a monopoly of the swill trade, or for gratifying any personal animosity in the business matters of anybody, and that in the eyes of the law, the Chinaman has as good a right to collect the swill as anybody else . . . [Tognazzini 1990:165–166].

The attitudes of the local newspaper toward the Chinese were characterized by a mixture of disdain and tolerance. A June 1891 editorial with the scathing title "The Chinese Must Go! The Latest Effort to Persuade the Obnoxious People to Keep Away" ironically contains several passages demonstrating a sincere effort to view the Chinese question from the immigrant's perspective (Tognazzini 1991:83). Another article from the same year is entirely derisive in its critique of the Chinese and all other migrants, commenting that "The American people are getting exceedingly weary of the impudent and insolent, intrusion of the scum and refuse of all the nations of the earth" (Tognazzini 1991:45). The antithesis of this attitude was expressed by Myron Angel, who, in this 1885 editorial, takes to task the arguments favoring Chinese expulsion and mitigates the view that Chinese are a threat to American labor interests:

> Our community was taken by surprise last Saturday by the call for a meeting to take into consideration the expulsion of the Chinese from this city. We had not seen the occasion for any excitement or dissatisfaction, excepting the general one of principle, that an excessive immigration of that people would be a danger to our institutions and oppressive to labor. . . . [They] are engaged as servants, washmen, gardeners and in business in connection with each other, and so little in competition with white servants or white labor as not to reduce wages or to be noticed. This is proven from fact that it is almost impossible to obtain white servants and those who have discharged Chinese servants in

> the expectation of engaging those of our own race have been compelled reluctantly to re-engage the Mongolian. . . . It is a demogogical plea that laborers are driven to tramp, boys to hoodlumism and girls to the bad because the Chinese in California have occupied the working places. . . . It would be illegal, inhumane and impolitic to expel the Chinese now here . . . [quoted in Ochs 1970:45].

Appropriately, the Chinese were treated with the most equity in the halls of justice. The judges and court officials that presided over legal matters involving the Chinese clearly demonstrated that the letter and spirit of the law superseded any prejudices they or any interested parties may have harbored against these immigrants. The following incident is inconsequential (if not amusing) in its details but demonstrates the conviction of the courts and city lawyers to uphold the principles of law.

> **SPEEDY JUSTICE**
>
> **Martinez Gets Five Years for Robbing Sam Sing**
>
> About 12 o'clock Tuesday night Sam Sing, one of the residents of Chinatown was awakened by some person standing over him with a revolver demanding money, at the cost of his life, if he refused. Sam informed the midnight marauder that he had no coin on hand, but to satisfy himself of that fact the robber searched the pockets of Sam's pantaloons. Finding nothing, the man who wore a mask, made his way out and fired his pistol once, presumably to scare Sam. Officer Crawford heard the shot and running to the place was informed of the trouble. The officer was told by Sam Sing that in his opinion the robber was one A. Martinez. Crawford located Martinez at a house on east Monterey street and lodged him in jail. Yesterday morning Martinez was arraigned before Judge Joyce and made a confession of his guilt. He was held to appear before the Superior court and re-entered his plea made in the Justice's court. At the request of District Attorney Dorn, the defendant assenting, a sentence of five years in Folsom prison was pronounced at once by Judge Gregg. It was a case of speedy justice surely, and the officers of the law are to be congratulated for their good work in this regard. After sentence had been pronounced it was learned that the defendant had actually stolen a watch and pistol from Sam Sing's house. Martinez worked one time for Sam [Tognazzini 1995:121].

Anglo reaction to Chinese merchants typically took the form of discrimination by local officials or public lobbying against these businessmen, as demonstrated by the town's machinations against Chinese laundries. Such attitudes, which at times ran counter to the public good as well as government protocol, are further illustrated by the *Tribune*'s account of the county's request to purchase wood from local suppliers.

> There were two bids only presented, one from Ah Luis *[sic]*, and the lower one from Yee Chung. Messrs. Waite and Bean opposed the letting of the contract to any Chinaman on the ground that the constitution prohibited the employment of Chinese on public work by any county, &c. Referred to the district attorney, his opinion was given that the clause was inapplicable inasmuch as the purchase of merchandise or supplies, such as wood, could not be considered 'employment on public works,' and that the statute requiring that all county purchases of the kind shall be made from the lowest and best bidder was mandatory. Supervisors Waite and Bean, however, persisted in voting against awarding the contract [Tognazzini 1993:77].

In 1895 the *Tribune* conveyed the protests of Charles Maha of Arroyo Grande, who encouraged county residents to patronize white vegetable gardeners over the Chinese markets, indicating that similar to the laundry business, the Chinese had also made an impact on the agricultural sector of the economy (Tognazzini 1995:80).

Probably because of the differences in clientele, Chinese merchants generally do not appear to have posed a threat to the town's commercial establishment, located a few blocks away on Higuera Street. In fact, some of these wealthy entrepreneurs derived rent from their properties in Chinatown. Confrontations between the two groups were thus few, although very telling when they did occur. In 1896 the *Tribune* reported that Mr. Warden—likely Horatio M. Warden, builder of the Warden Tower Building and the Warden Block—rented one of his Higuera Street properties to a Chinese retailer (Tognazzini 1996:35–37, 40). The deal created an uproar among the Higuera shopkeepers, who distributed the following protest signed by over 40 individuals and companies:

> We, the undersigned, do hereby earnestly protest against the renting of store rooms in the business portion of Higuera, Monterey or Chorro streets, to any Chinese merchant, artist or artisan, and for the cause of such protest allege:
>
> That we are business men and taxpayers in the city of San Luis Obispo; that we are bona fide residents of this city, having permanent homes here:
>
> That we have always contributed liberally towards the improvement of streets and general progress of the city:
>
> That we consider it a great injustice at this time, in view of these facts, to be thrown side by side with this low, cankerous and vile class of Asiatic competition:
>
> That experience in San Francisco and other towns has shown that where the Chinese had gained a foothold, respectable business has been ruined or driven to other localities [Tognazzini 1996:36].

A committee from this group was reportedly planning to meet with Warden, presumably to convince him to renege on his agreement with the Chinese merchant. It is not known, however, how this matter was eventually resolved (Tognazzini 1996:37).

In the context of this incident, it is important to note that a few years later Ah Louis and Yee Chung were charter members of the San Luis Obispo Board of Trade, which included some of the same individuals who had signed the protest letter; their membership in the organization suggests that the town's establishment at least regarded these merchants with some respect and acknowledged the contributions of Chinatown to the local economy (Tognazzini 2003:175). In the eyes of the Higuera Street businessmen, which were colored by a milder form of xenophobia than that of the Arroyo Grade Improvement Club, the row with the Chinese merchant was thus an issue of "knowing (or not knowing) one's place" in the town's social order. In other words, the establishment appeared willing to grant the Chinese their right to operate in the city, provided that such commercial liberties did not come at the expense of the white businesses along Higuera Street.

4.3.6 Partial Acceptance of the Chinese and the Legacies of the Exclusionary Acts, 1900s to 1940s

As with other ethnic enclaves, the Chinese living in San Luis Obispo represented a culturally distinct and a structurally separate entity. The resident of Chinatown could eat, conduct his business, worship, and seek diversion, all without leaving its social boundaries. In 1900, under the direction of Ah Louis, Yee Chung, and Sam Sing, Chinatown took a large step toward establishing itself as a formal part of the town by entering a display in the May Day Parade.

> A most novel feature of the parade here, though quite common in some of the larger towns in such functions was announced last night. This will be the display of the Chinese of this city. For several days the principal Chinamen of San Luis have been preparing for this on a most elaborate scale and have sent to San Francisco and Sacramento for ideas and material for floats and other features, characteristic of the race [Tognazzini 2000:37].

In 1903, the same year Ah Louis and Yee Chung became members of the City's Board of Trade, the *Tribune* advocated the admittance of Chinese to the town's new Carnegie Library (opened the following year) by stating that "all fair minded persons will admit that never before has anything been done for their advancement and it is high time some steps were being taken in that direction" (Tognazzini 2003:74, 175).

Even before the turn of the century, there were modest attempts to integrate the Chinese into the broader community. An 1895 *Tribune* article states that:

> A number of the church people of the city are seriously considering the project of opening a school solely for the education of Chinese. At several places in the state . . . similar institutions have been established and conducted with no little success. The almond eyed pupils, though considerably advanced in age, have shown a willingness to learn, and have acquired considerable proficiency in learning the English language [Tognazzini 1995:63].

However, the exclusionary acts had not only succeeded in limiting the commercial liberties of the Chinese immigrant, but had curtailed his social opportunities as well; given the dearth of prospective brides, the Chinese laborer was unable to establish a family in America and thus was closed off from the normal road of integration and assimilation taken by most immigrants.

Lee (1986) indicates that in 1900 the number of Chinese living in the county peaked at 800. But on the eve of Chinese New Year 1902, the *Tribune* reported an uncharacteristically dull precelebration atmosphere, adding that the population of this quarter of town had decline by two-thirds from earlier years (Tognazzini 2002:20). This decline may have been influenced by the indefinite renewal of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1902. The Chinese population would continue to fall precipitously to 97 in 1930 and 64 in 1940.

4.3.7 The Diversification of Chinatown

Japanese immigrants had been arriving in San Luis Obispo County since the late 1800s. These immigrants started as laborers but saved enough money to lease land on which they could farm their own crops. Their success resulted in the Japanese surpassing the Chinese as the target of anti-Asian sentiment. In 1913, the California Legislature passed the Alien Land Law prohibiting

the ownership and limiting the lease period of land to Asian immigrants. However, the American-born children of these men were American citizens with full land ownership rights. Therefore, many owned land in their children's names. Other immigrants, such as the Kurokawa, Watanabe, and Tanaka families set up stores that specialized in selling the Japanese fresh produce as well as supplying Japanese families with a source of ethnic food and sundries. The Watanabe store on south Higuera Street, across from the Pacific Coast Railroad Depot, formed the heart of the Japanese commercial activity (Krieger and Krieger 1991).

The Kurokawa family, however, chose to establish their business on the edge of Chinatown. T. H. Kurokawa and his wife opened the Sun Grocery Store on the corner of Palm and Morro streets sometime in the 1910s. They lived in the house on the same lot, which was owned by the Call family. Their son Paul, who was born in 1915, became a well known member of the community. The family occupied this lot until sometime in the mid-1930s. By 1939, the Manilla Pool Hall operated out of the old Kurokawa store. This business was one of the Filipino ventures that operated in Chinatown in the 1930s and 1940s. D. M. Pabro operated the Philippine Pool Hall out of 861 Palm Street. However, the Kurokawas appear to be the only non-Chinese occupants who established a home on the south side of Palm Street in Chinatown (Polk 1931, 1939; Krieger and Krieger 1991).

The Japanese families were integrated into the community by the 1930s, with schools and places of worship. Retail merchants, particularly David Muzio and Andrew Sauer, were friendly to the Japanese. However, at the onset of World War II, President Franklin Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 that led to the incarceration of approximately 120,000 Japanese aliens and citizens from the Pacific states. Many Japanese families did not return to the area after release, and thus Japanese population was greatly decreased (Krieger and Krieger 1991).

4.3.8 The Decline of Chinatown

In 1943 the Chinese Exclusion Act was finally repealed due mainly to the alliance between the United States and China during World War II, and the second half of the twentieth century has seen another wave of Chinese immigration.

San Luis Obispo County was one of the destinations of these new immigrants. However, settlement patterns differed from those of the nineteenth century. Instead of congregating in ethnic enclaves, immigrants settled throughout the county. None came to replace the aging residents of the city's Chinatown, and the Palm streetscape began to change. The only Chinese landowner on the south side of Palm Street was Ah Louis, who owned Parcel 2, the location of the Mee Heng Low Restaurant. The non-Asian landowners, anticipating potential profits, began selling or developing their Palm Street properties. Government offices and auto-related businesses replaced the wooden falsefront buildings that had stood on the south side of Palm since the 1870s. In 1950, the City purchased most of the land along Palm Street between Ah Louis' store and Morro Street. The remainder of the old wooden Chinatown buildings were demolished so that a City surface parking lot could be constructed. Ah Louis' store is all that remains of San Luis Obispo's original Chinatown.

State of California — The Resources Agency
DEPARTMENT OF PARKS AND RECREATION

HISTORIC RESOURCES INVENTORY

Ser. No. 0147-03C
HABS ___ HAER ___ NR 3 SHL ___ Loc ___
UTM: A 10/712550/3906590 B ___
C ___ D ___

IDENTIFICATION

1. Common name: Ah Louis Store
2. Historic name: Ah Louis Store
3. Street or rural address: 800 Palm Street
   City San Luis Obispo Zip 93401 County San Luis Obispo
4. Parcel number: 02-415-08
5. Present Owner: Louis, W.Y., et al., c/o H. Louis Address: 800 Palm Street
   City San Luis Obispo Zip 93401 Ownership is: Public ___ Private X
6. Present Use: Commercial Original use: Commercial & Residential

DESCRIPTION

7a. Architectural style: Italianate

7b. Briefly describe the present *physical description* of the site or structure and describe any major alterations from its original condition:

This two story brick commercial building is rectangular in plan. It has a projecting iron balcony that faces the street, four deeply set windows, and iron shutters on the two first floor windows. It has deeply recessed entrance stairs, located in the center of the structure. Four finials trim the top of the roof. The integrity of the structure is intact, with only minor alterations to the facade.

8. Construction date: Estimated ___ Factual 1884
9. Architect Unknown
10. Builder Ah Louis
11. Approx. property size (in feet) Frontage 100' Depth 150' or approx. acreage ___
12. Date(s) of enclosed photograph(s) October 1982

DPR

13. Condition: Excellent ___ Good _X_ Fair ___ Deteriorated ___ No longer in existence ___

14. Alterations: Modernized window storefront

15. Surroundings: (Check more than one if necessary) Open land ___ Scattered buildings ___ Densely built-up ___
Residential _X_ Industrial ___ Commercial _X_ Other: Parking lot

16. Threats to site: None known _X_ Private development ___ Zoning ___ Vandalism ___
Public Works project ___ Other: ___

17. Is the structure: On its original site? Yes Moved? ___ Unknown? ___

18. Related features: ___

SIGNIFICANCE

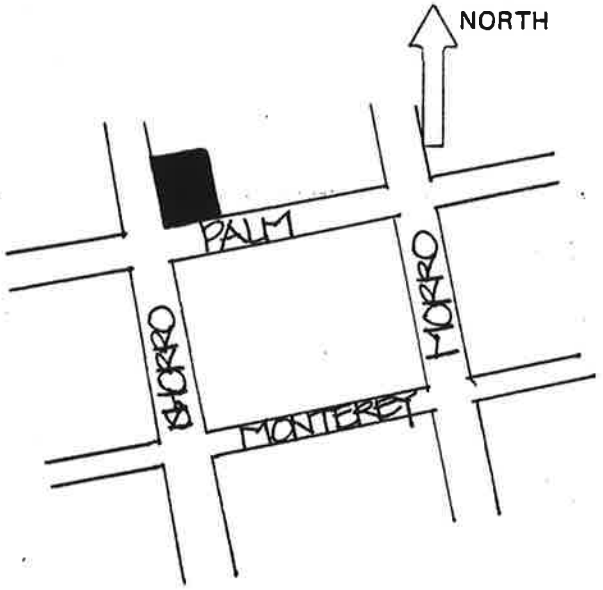
19. Briefly state historical and/or architectural importance (include dates, events, and persons associated with the site.)
The Ah Louis store was built and owned by Ah Louis, the central figure and pioneer entrepeneur throughout the history of San Luis Obispo's Chinatown. A labor contractor, farmer, rancher and brick manufacturer, Ah Louis contracted from China many of the workers who helped build the Pacific Coast Railroad. He was born in China in 1838 and came to California in 1856. Ah Louis eventually became the unofficial mayor, postmaster, employer, banker, storekeeper and advisor for the residents of Chinatown until his death in 1936. Replacing an earlier wood frame building erected on the same site in 1874, the present store was built in 1884 with bricks from his own factory. Supposedly steel shutters and zinc for the roof were imported from England and used for protection. It is said that Louis personally checked every phase of construction. The Ah Louis General Merchandise Store was patronized by some several hundred Chinese employees who had migrated to this area, not only to purchase supplies and goods but to use as a bank. In 1931, as modern storefront facades became fashionable on commercial buildings, two plate glass windows were installed in front of the building for $250.00. Today, the Ah Louis Store, now a State Historical Landmark Number 802, offers imports and gift items to local residents and tourists alike.

20. Main theme of the historic resource: (If more than one is checked, number in order of importance.)
Architecture 2 Arts & Leisure ___
Economic/Industrial 3 Exploration/Settlement ___
Government ___ Military ___
Religion ___ Social/Education 1

21. Sources (List books, documents, surveys, personal interviews and their dates).
"U.S. History Written Around Ah Louis Family", by Doris Olsen in Chinatown News, March 3, 1977, Vancouver, B.C. Canada

22. Date form prepared 23 June 1983
By (name) Historic Res.Survey Staff
Organization City of San Luis Obispo
Address: P.O.Box 321
City San Luis Obispo Zip 93401
Phone: (805) 541-1000

Locational sketch map (draw and label site and surrounding streets, roads, and prominent landmarks):



History and Description:

Ah Louis is not an exclamation, but a name. It belongs to an illustrious Chinese who, a century ago participated actively and importantly in America's western migration.

Ah Louis contracted the Chinese coolie labor which through a decade of bitter winters and summers, dug the tunnels and laid the tracks for the historic thrust of the railroads heading east to meet rail crews building west from Chicago.

After the great enterprise was achieved and the nation had its first transcontinental route, Ah Louis settled down in San Luis Obispo and began an import business in his own store which he built with his own two hands from bricks he made himself, with brick from his own brick yard. He also made the bricks for the Pacific Round House and the Sinsheimer Building.

To go back to the beginning, Ah Louis at the age of 21 was known as Wong On. He left a village in China to search for gold on the west coast of America. In 1860 he arrived in California. He got the name Ah Louis from John Harford. In San Luis Obispo he started out as a cook at the French Hotel.

Ah Louis showed a real liking to the community of San Luis Obispo and also showed an interest in American customs. At Christmas time he advertised holiday goods. He also showed recognition of the Fourth of July by decorating his store.

It was in 1885, that Ah Louis drew up a contract with Mr. Alfred Walker to build a new brick store on the corner of Palm and Chorro Streets. Ah Louis received the editorial remark: "The building is an ornament to that part of the city, as it would be to any part and shows the proprietor to be an enterprising, competent businessman."

The Ah Louis Store, State Historical Landmark No 802, is the first Chinese store in the county. It functioned as a bank, counting house, post office and a general merchandise store where herbs were sold. The Ah Louis Store, City Hall, and a few other buildings were the only structures in town not made of wood at that time.

Now a California State Historical Landmark, the store continues to provide imports and other gift items to the tourists and residents of San Luis Obispo and is still run by the Louis family. Howard Louis now is the operator of the store. All eight children of Ah