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Local News

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Chinese Faced Added Challenges After '06 Quake

By Linda Yee

(CBS 5) The 1906 quake was a destructive killer. But some residents with Anti-Chinese views saw it as a blessing, and an opportunity to take over the valuable real estate that housed Chinatown.

An estimated 25,000 Chinese lived in the 12 square block area of Chinatown at the time of the quake. Mayor Eugene Schmidt and other city leaders wanted them out because Chinatown was sitting on land coveted by developers.

"When the quake happened, people thought, 'aha! Here's the opportunity to rid the heart of San Francisco (of) the Chinese,'" says Sue Lee of the Chinese Historical society.

Within days of the quake, a committee made up of prominent San Francisco men, including future Senator James Phelan and Lawyer Abraham Ruef, was formed to relocate Chinatown to Hunter's Point. They even had a name picked out. They planned to call the new settlement "Oriental City."

Pressure to move out the Chinese residents hit a fever pitch following the quake as Chinese survivors were segregated from other refugees. Many successful Chinese merchants were afraid that they would not be allowed to rebuild their stores. Lee Yoke Suey was among them, and his family was caught up in the drama.

"My grandfather was an importer/exporter merchant. His father was Lee Wong Sang, and worked on the railroad," says Suey's granddaughter Connie Young Yu.

Lee was born on Dupont Guy (now known as Grant Avenue). After escaping the ruins, he realized that he had left behind his birth certificate.

"My grandfather made it back to Commercial Street. Got his documents and shoved it into his coat, and when he was about to leave, a soldier burst in and stabbed him...bayoneted on his side." Connie says. "My grandfather risked his life for this certificate of birth."

The Chinese kept detailed paper trails. Documentation of their right to be in the U.S. meant everything. Fear of deportation meant the end of family fortune.

And while families tried to hold on to both their land and their documentation, Chinatown was being overrun by relic hunters looting both stores and homes. Many Chinese artifacts were picked from the ruins.

Efforts to relocate the Chinese eventually failed for a number of reasons. The first was financial, because Chinatown was an attraction. Prior to the quake it had brought in more than \$30 million in tourist money.

It seems that many of the Chinese were also very good tenants.

"The Chinese over paid for the space they rented in Chinatown," says Sue Lee. "The owners thought 'Oh, if Chinese were to leave, who's going to pay the exorbitant rent the Chinese were paying?'"

There was also some diplomatic intervention. The Dowager Empress of China contributed thousands of dollars for the rebuilding, and the Chinese government made it clear that mistreatment of the Chinese would hurt trade relations.

The combination of influences finally ended the push to establish 'Oriental City', but some of the architectural ideas from that plan still live on. Those designs can be seen in two buildings on the corner of Grant and California. They were the first in the area to be rebuilt after the quake, and style became the signature look of Chinatown today.

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"My grandfather risked his life for this certificate of birth," says Connie Young Yu.



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