

## Chinatown, 1906: The End and the Beginning

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AT 5:12 A.M. on April 18, 1906 my great-grandfather and my grandparents who lived above their store on Commercial Street were awakened—like every other San Franciscan that morning—by a monstrous tremor that cracked the ceiling, shook the walls and sent objects crashing to the floor. My grandmother, Mrs. Lee Yoke Suey, held her baby Alice close. It was the day of her first child's month-old celebration. A friend and neighbor, Mrs. Chan, woke up to see the door of her room wrenched from its hinges by the great quake. The building was creaking ominously, and she ran outside and saw the Lee family outside and everyone else who lived on the street. The sheltered Chinese wives, so seldom seen in public, were standing terror-stricken in their bedclothes like everyone else. When the tremors subsided, and they thought it was safe, they returned to their damaged buildings.

Before noon, fires raged north and south of Market Street, and although it was hoped that the line could be held at Sansome Street, with the water mains broken, the fire was uncontrollable and leaped to Kearny. The demolition crew, struggling to stop the path of flames by blasting buildings, had by this time run out of dynamite and blew up a drug store at the corner of Clay and Kearny with black powder,

sending the fire towards the flimsy, close quarters of Chinatown. Thousands of Chinese were forced to abandon their homes before the end of the day.

The customs of the people were strong. Despite the urgency of the evacuation, my grandmother paused for a symbolic, abbreviated observance of a “red eggs and ginger” celebration, snipping a lock of the baby's hair and rolling an egg over her little head. Her father-in-law, Lee Wong Sang, concerned with the young mother's fragile health, poured some precious water saved in a kettle and insisted that she drink as much of it as she could. An arduous journey lay ahead.

Like all residents of Chinatown, they saved only what they could carry—family jewels, a bundle of food and blankets for the cold night. Burdened with these and their child, they joined the desperate throngs of people seeking a way out of the imperiled city. My grandmother tottering on her tiny bound feet, had to stop frequently, and without realizing it, taking her last look at Chinatown. Mrs. Chan's husband looking southward as they rested in the park on Columbus Street and reassured his wife, “I think Chinatown is still safe. We can go back soon.”

My grandmother, tripping on the rubble and



cracks in the earth, could not walk any further. Her father-in-law, Lee Wong Sang, was somehow able to secure her and the child a ride in a wagon to Golden Gate Park.

Meanwhile, Lee Yoke Suey, my grandfather, had abruptly left his family to rush back to Chinatown to save his birth certificate and other important documents. He was a merchant, born in San Francisco, but without proof of his status, he could be detained or deported. It was worth the risk.

Soldiers were dispatched to Chinatown, forbidding anyone from entering the buildings. My grandfather slipped in the doorway of his store. He found his citizenship papers and stuffed them in his coat, but before he could leave, a guardsman charged into the shop and stabbed him in the side with a bayonet. Lee fell to the ground and lay still. When the soldier left, he pressed his hand to his bleeding wound, and limped out of Chinatown. Another man, not so fortunate, was stoned to death by whites when he returned to recover his property.

By the next morning, the dreadful news reached the Chinese huddled in various refugee camps that their homes, their community—the most famous district of the city—was completely in ashes.

San Francisco was devastated, but all over the world the courage and resiliency of her people—the “indomitable spirit of San Francisco”—was heralded. Of the disaster Gertrude Atherton said, “It has created a new and capable, experienced set of pioneers.” For the Chinese, in the aftermath of the quake and fire, there would be another battle for survival.

The *Overland Monthly* rejoiced: “Fire has reclaimed to civilization and cleanliness the Chinese ghetto, and no Chinatown will be permitted in the borders of the City...it seems as though a divine wisdom directed the range of seismic horror and range of the fire god. Wisely, the worse was cleared away with the best.”

A great new city was being planned, but reconstructing Chinatown was not part of the picture. The central location of the leveled Chinatown site was coveted by opportunistic financiers who envisioned a new commercial area. A group of white property owners, the



Dupont Street Improvement Club, wanted Chinese banned. Boss Abe Ruef headed a subcommittee on the relocation of Chinatown, drafting proposals to move the Chinese to far corners of the city, one possibility being Hunters’ Point. Another, announced by Ruef on April 29, was that the new Chinese quarters be at the Presidio Golf Links. These plans, of course, were made without the consent of those most vitally concerned, the Chinese like my great-grandfather and grandparents who refused to be moved from their homes and businesses. They owned their property, and there were no legal means to force them out. It occurred to Mayor Schmitz and his administration that by doing away with Chinatown, they would actually lose money, through the tourism that Chinatown generated, tax dollars paid by the Chinese and the China trade. There was no satisfactory solution from any point of view to relocating the Chinese. Before the various committees disbanded, the Chinese were already returning home.

Mrs. Ho Chan set up her sewing machine in a temporary plank building at the site of her home and went to work making clothes. Temporary buildings were constructed on Dupont Guy and a steady stream of returning residents resumed their businesses. Crates of goods from China, everything from chopsticks to *Ng Gah Pei* jugs, began arriving by the wagon loads. The Lee family settled back into quarters above their reconstructed shop. Like thousands of other Chinese, they returned to *Dai Fow*, undaunted, to begin the tremendous task of rebuilding their lives and community.