Lew Hing: A Kinsman to the Rescue

OAKLAND WAS NOT prepared for the sudden influx of refugees, and the Chinese who escaped there by ferry received the worse situation, kept in an open area at Lake Merritt, with meager provisions and without shelter from the soaking rains that were to come. At this dire moment one San Francisco Chinese, Lew Hing, took the initiative and launched his own relief effort in Oakland.

He was an established man of means, but on April 18th, like everyone in the devastated city, Lew Hing, had lost his home and his business. Fortunately, his family was on a visit to China and no one was injured in the cannery building that the Lews called home. Although he was unable to save any of his belongings in the rubble, Lew Hing had purpose and a destination as he waited among the desperate throngs of his fellow countrymen for the ferry to Oakland.

Born in Canton in 1858, Lew Hing was sent to San Francisco by his father to join his brother in his metal shop. A year after he arrived, his brother died and left 13 year old Lew alone in America. But he was resourceful, eager to work and to learn, studying English at a mission school, working at the metal shop and finding odd jobs besides. By the time he was 18, he started a cannery in San Francisco with kinsman Lew Yu-Tang at the northeast corner of Sacramento and Stockton streets. He married in 1877, and his wife gave birth to their first child in their residence on Commercial street, and later the family lived above the Stockton Street cannery with other kinsmen. Canning was a new concept in the 1890’s and Lew was a progressive, far-sighted man. With the success of his first, he started an another cannery in 1904, the Pacific Coast Canning Company in Oakland, a most propitious choice of location, at 12th and Pine Street.

It was the cannery he established in the quiet town of Oakland that would play such a major role in the recovery of the Chinese community.

They were all on the same boat, but the Chinese, segregated from whites, were in a precarious situation, subject to mistreatment from authorities. Lew Hing, an “alien ineligible for citizenship” was well familiar as were all Chinese, with harassment and discrimination. He had to carry a Certificate of Residence as required for Chinese workers by the Geary Act with his bearing the stamp, “other than a laborer.” During the disaster, most of the Chinese did not speak English and were often physically shoved around and waited fearfully in relief lines. All their lives they had experienced hostility outside their community. The earthquake gave rise to rampant misuse of authority in Chinatown. The looting of Chinese businesses went unchecked in the hours before the firestorm, with national guardsmen keeping Chinese from returning to their homes and businesses while they and white civilians alike
Word of the discriminatory treatment of Chinese during the disaster reached President Theodore Roosevelt. Although he ordered that the Chinese be treated fairly, prompting authorities to make better provisions for Chinese, it did not deter city officials from planning to relocate Chinatown and evict the residents. The Chinese were on their own.

Once in Oakland Lew Hing rose to meet the needs of his people. His Pacific Coast Canning Company employed Italian and Portuguese immigrants as well as Chinese. It was a large property on two blocks. Lew Hing directed workers to set temporary housing and distribute emergency provisions. Soon the cannery grounds would be a field of tents with capable cooks making hot Cantonese meals for the hungry refugees. At last the exhausted Chinese were part of a familiar community, safe and protected until they could be on their feet again.

Leading the way for self-determination for Chinese, Lew Hing started a branch of his family association in Oakland to assist his fellow clansmen in re-establishing their lives.

With attempts to destroy their community and the degrading treatment they suffered during relief efforts, Chinese needed their own bank. Led by Fook Tin Eli, an experienced banker, The Bank of Canton was incorporated in 1907 and Lew Hing was the President. Lew expanded his investments in Chinatown, rebuilding his Stockton Street cannery, investing in two hotels and other enterprises. In 1915 he was chairman of the Board of Directors for the China Mail Steamship line.

Lew Hing’s role in the relief and reconstruction efforts of Chinatown is never mentioned in the grand histories of the San Francisco earthquake, but his descendants have documented his life. Bruce Quan, his great-grandson has collected family recollections, records and papers of Lew Hing’s business, and describes him as a remarkably generous man with high principles who lived simply and was devoted to his family. Jean M. Liu, his grand-daughter and author of Lew Hing- Family Portrait, describes him as “a tall, large-framed man” with a determined walk and voice that characterized a leader who rose to challenges in the face of adversity.

The greatest challenge came when all was lost in Dai Fow and this courageous Cantonese would go across the bay to provide relief for his people and direction for a strong Chinese American community.