

"Accessible, compelling and...poignant." —Robert Coles

BITTER MELON

Inside America's Last Rural Chinese Town



Jeff Gillenkirk

James Motlow

With a new afterword by the author

Introduction by Suebeng Chan

BITTER MELON

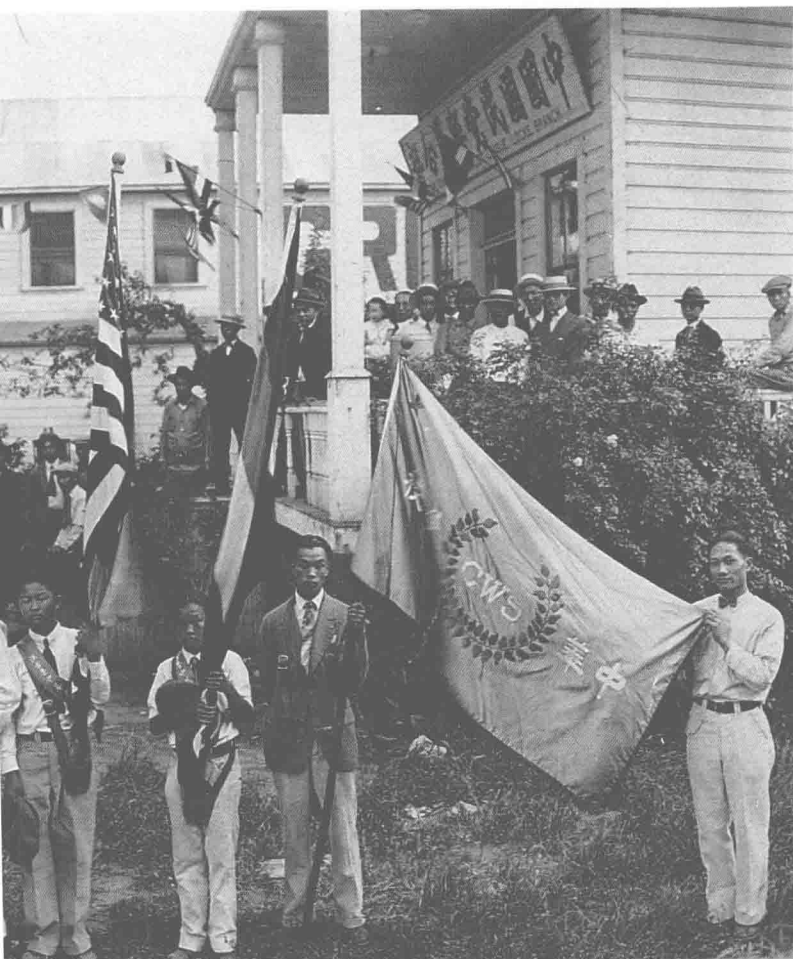
Inside America's Last Rural Chinese Town



Jeff Gillenkirk¹⁵
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Introduction by Sucheng Chan

HEYDAY BOOKS
Berkeley, California



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年五十國民
映攝日六

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Jacket photo: Bing Fai Chow on his porch above Main Street, Locke, 1976

Title page photo: Main Street, Locke, 1984

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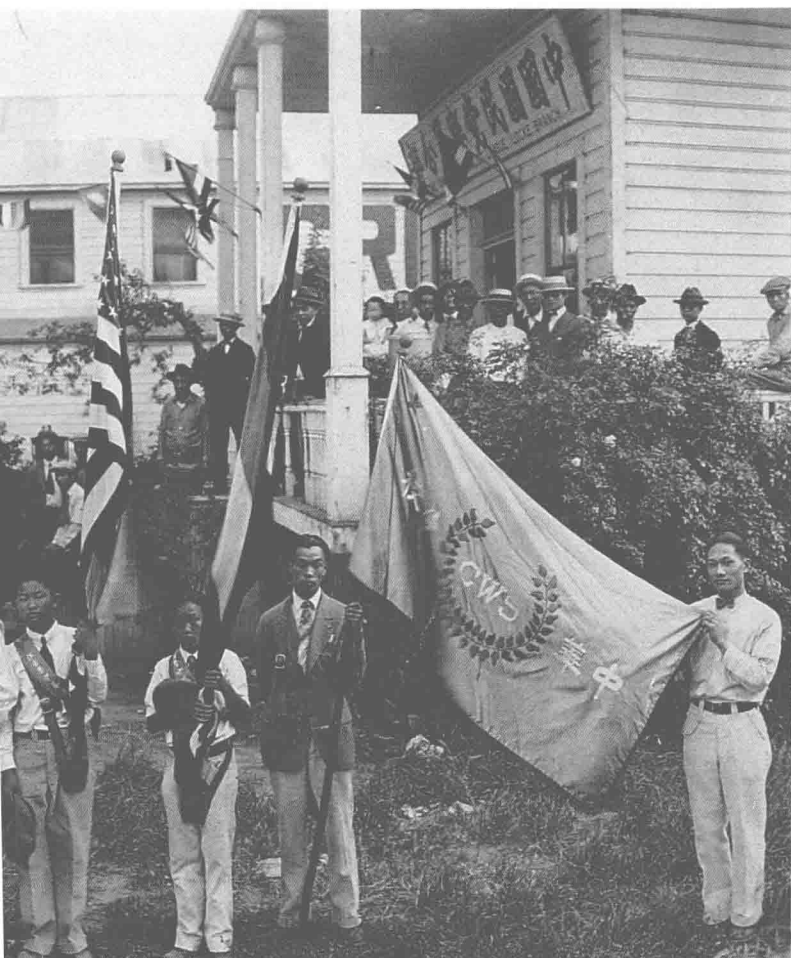


Main Street, Locke, 1926. The opening of the Locke Chinese School. (Sacramento River Delta Historical Society)



*Don't marry your daughter to a Gold Mountain Boy
He will not be in bed one full year out of ten
Spiders spin webs on top of her bed
While dust covers fully one side.*

—ANONYMOUS



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Preface

MY FATHER FIRST introduced me to the Sacramento Delta in the 1950s, taking me on Sunday drives south from the city along the tree-lined levee roads. Later, as a young man, when the streets of Sacramento were melting and my spirits feeling trapped, I would escape alone down River Road, where the air was softly blowing across the wide, green-yellow fields. From the road atop the levees I could glimpse the slow green river on its way to San Francisco, and stopping my car, I would get out and let the air wrap itself around my body, setting my captured emotions free. I experienced a soundness and a sense of place in the Delta I never felt in Sacramento. I feel the same way today about this remarkable place.

But it wasn't until February 1971 that I became a part of the Delta, when I stopped to

Railroad workers, Monterey Peninsula, California, 1889. Chinese first came to California for gold, but were driven from the fields by foreign labor taxes and violence. By 1854, as many as a thousand Chinese a month were streaming into West Coast ports, recruited as "coolies" (from the Hindu kuli—"unskilled laborer"—or more appropriately in Chinese, k'u-li—"bitter strength"), for western railroad work. Chinese eventually comprised almost 90 percent of the workforce on the Central Pacific Railroad, working for less than a dollar a day. After the railroads were completed, thousands went to work building the first levees in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, for wages as low as ten cents per cubic yard of earth moved. By 1877, the value of their labor on railroads and land reclamation was estimated by a California land surveyor at nearly \$300 million. (California State Library)

visit a friend in Locke on my way to San Francisco. To my surprise, he was planning on leaving, and offered me his place on Main Street to rent. I'd been looking for a place in the country for a long time—for a home away from Sacramento and its white-bread, middle-American culture. I was looking for a refuge, a retreat, a place to study and practice my photography.

Why not Locke? I thought. It was small, quiet, unique; with its Main Street of ramshackle wooden buildings and second-story balconies sloping over the sidewalk, it seemed like a quintessential Hollywood western town, just twenty-five miles from Sacramento. Besides, I'd always wanted to live on Main Street somewhere, for all the sentimental feelings the name connotes. So on a whim, an instinct, I rented his place that day. It was a decision that would affect my life right up to the present day.

My new home was in the bottom floor of a two-story wooden building on Main Street, in what used to be a Chinese restaurant called Happy's Cafe. I spent most of my first winter next to the oven staying warm, writing, thinking, looking for a sense of self. It wasn't long, however, before I discovered that I was one of only three or four non-Chinese living in Locke. My neighbors, men and women, were mostly retired farmworkers who had come to America to earn their fortune, and now were living out their days in this remnant of a rural Chinese culture that once stretched the length of the West Coast. That spring, in fact, a bronze plaque was hammered to the side of the Tules restaurant, commemorating Locke's survival as an all-Chinese town with placement on the National Register of Historic Places.

Here, the awards and articles said, was the last surviving Chinese town built by Chinese, for Chinese, arisen from the ashes of fires that

destroyed nearby Walnut Grove's Chinatown in 1915. Here, during Locke's heyday in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, was an autonomous island of Chinese culture, with a permanent population of 600, a seasonal farm labor population of a thousand more . . . with four restaurants, a half dozen markets, dry goods stores, five warehouses (all staffed by white women), a post office, two slaughterhouses, a flour mill, canneries, shipping wharves, an opera, speak-easies during Prohibition, and the Main Event—as many as five gambling houses operating at once.

Locke was a town like no other, a wide-open *Chinese* western town. And as a non-Chinese living there, I wasn't accepted right away. Out on Main Street, I found my neighbors would pass me by with the same cold avoidance they showed to other whites. I found myself caught between a culture I did not accept, and one that seemed unwilling to accept me. Which was all right with me. Being in the country, in a small town and on my own, was right where I wanted to be. I was twenty-two years old.

After my second winter in Locke I moved back to Key Street, or Second Street—there being only two streets in town—and my relationship with the town began to change. I would sit out on the porch of my house and watch, amazed by almost everything I saw: their town, so small, so poor, yet so orderly beneath a collapsing facade. I remember the exotic peacefulness of seeing almost the entire Chinese population of Key Street parading off to their gardens at dawn, or out to the sloughs to go fishing . . . the women clad in black pajama-like cottons and broad Chinese hats . . . the men in khaki pants and blue work shirts and straw hats . . . all carrying metal buckets and bamboo poles, with burlap bags slung over their shoulders. They all seemed so close to the earth. I learned later that most of them had been tilling the land and fishing since childhood, here and in China's Pearl River Delta. Their gardens here, begun in the 1930s,

teemed with produce year around, probably because I never saw anyone take a thing from the earth without returning some organic matter. This economy seemed to apply to their entire life. It was a way of life—a cleanness, simpleness, and directness—that would profoundly affect my own life and way of seeing things.

Back on Key Street I had my own garden, and I made it a point every morning to wave hello to my neighbors. I usually received a nod, sometimes a wave in return, though little more. Certainly I made no attempt to photograph them at this time. I didn't feel close enough or accepted enough even to ask them for that privilege. Instead, I began exploring and photographing subjects in the Delta and California's nearby Central Valley, pursuing my main photographic interest of people and places—how they fit together, or how they didn't. I studied roadside cafes opened in the forties and fifties, with their chipped, faded neon, their lonely coffee sippers and bored, tired waitresses, the old jukeboxes and scratched, heavy plates; Mexican, Filipino, and Chicano farmworkers, just as I found them in their towns and labor camps; the hot, fertile landscape of the Sacramento–San Joaquin Delta, and the stoic hands who worked it. And every night I returned home to my little house in the peaceful town by the river.

Then one morning that summer my life in Locke changed for good when my most diminutive neighbor, Mrs. Leong, stopped me in the street. In extremely difficult English she asked me to follow her, and led me into the apartment she rented out behind her house. Even more surprising, she led me into the bathroom, which was in very bad shape—the toilet bowl was sinking through a rotting wooden floor. This was the first time in two years I'd ever been invited into a household in Locke. She asked me if I was able to fix it, and of course I said yes, though I didn't know exactly what was in store for me.

It took me more than a week to replace the rotten wood in the floor, the toilet, and the broken plumbing. For compensation, Mrs. Leong fixed dinner for me almost every night that week. Even though she spoke hardly any English and I no Chinese whatsoever, we were able to communicate with gestures, facial expressions, intuition, and laughter. I usually brought my camera with me, and continually asked her and her husband if I could take their pictures. These shy, elderly, Chinese-born farmworkers always refused.

Until one afternoon several months after I'd finished repairing Mrs. Leong's bathroom, I was returning home with a bunch of roses I'd picked for someone, and found her talking with a friend on her front porch; I spontaneously handed the roses to Mrs. Leong, an act which instantly pleased her. She smiled broadly—then pointed to my camera and asked me if I wanted to take her picture. Of course I did! This was the first cooperative portrait I ever took of any of my neighbors in Locke.

My experience with Mrs. Leong—working for her, sharing meals, and her agreement to be photographed—carried me across some kind of invisible barrier with the other townspeople as well. Over the next several months other neighbors agreed to be photographed. I had my camera in hand whenever I left the house, and simply followed my intuition and photographed whatever moved me. I fell in love with this funny, falling-down town and its acres of flowering pear orchards, the confluences of dark river waters at the front and back of town, its gardens and fences and fruit trees, its unusual people. Seventy-five miles upriver from San Francisco, Locke was more like a century away, part of a picturesque agricultural area of winding levee roads and quaint drawbridges, lush Victorian estates and riverfront farm villages hidden among seven rivers crisscrossing the Central Valley between the Coast Range and the Sierra Nevada. The air, the tow-

ering skies, the cool summer breezes that blow up from San Francisco Bay, the lush, palpable light of the Delta . . . all these things made the normally blistering valley summers not only livable, but delectable—and eminently photographable. There is a rich, yet subtle, almost silk-like texture to the air among the Delta's thousand miles of silty waterways that is special, even by California standards. No wonder so many of my neighbors chose not to follow their children to the nearby cities, or their ancestors back to China.

Eventually, by popular demand, I became the town's fix-it person, and my willingness to help my elderly neighbors deepened their trust in me. By the following winter I was an accepted citizen of Locke, and so was my camera. For the next eight years I lived and worked there, happily able to share with my neighbors and others the wonder, warmth, and magic I felt about the town, its people, and the simple way of life there through my photographs.

Then in 1979, I moved to San Francisco. I began to see dozens of stories about the history of Locke. Except for one, *American Chinatown*, a 30-minute film by Todd Carrel, none of them ever dealt specifically with the people who lived there, how they got there, and how they lived their lives. After all, if Locke were a nationally historic town, then all of my friends and neighbors—Bing Fai Chow, Mrs. Leong, Wong Yow, Jo Lung, Suen Sum, So Yung, the whole crowd—were Nationally Historic people! I soon realized that not enough of the real story of Locke was being told, because no one had had the opportunity to become a part of the community. But I had. I had many long-standing friendships with my Chinese neighbors, and hundreds of photographs of the town and its people. It was *my* responsibility, I realized, to tell the story of my neighbors' lives in the Golden Mountain—and quickly.

Because the Locke I moved into in 1971 is quickly vanishing. Most of the remaining Chinese are old, and as they die, none are arriving

to take their places. Their sons and daughters have gone off to the cities and universities, fleeing the farm laborer's life and leaving Locke's fate to a Hong Kong developer named Ng Tor Tai, who bought the entire town and 450 surrounding acres in 1977 and immediately proposed developing a subdivision of 238 condominiums, a yacht marina, and a Chinese "theme park" in the garden area in back. While new county zoning ordinances quickly rendered that plan obsolete, new ones are being proposed continually. Under all of them it seems clear that Locke would cease to be a Chinese community, and become the museum of one instead; it therefore became extremely important to me that Locke's story be told—but by the people who lived it, as personal testimony to the portraits they've allowed me to keep.

In the spring of 1983, after trying unsuccessfully for several years to sell my idea to publishers, I asked friend and professional writer Jeff Gillenkirk to help me organize a book encompassing my photographs and oral histories with the people of Locke. Thankfully he shared my enthusiasm, and jumped head first into the project. As neither of us spoke Chinese, we approached Connie Chan, a bright, cheerful young woman who had grown up in Locke, and hired her as interpreter/translator for those residents who spoke no English. Her familiarity with the Zhongshan dialect and first-name friendship with her neighbors helped open many doors to us.

That summer and fall nearly every weekend found the three of us in Locke, where my mother, Mary Motlow, now had a home, taping stories of my neighbors' experiences in the Golden Mountain. Connie's translations and interviews done in English were then transcribed by a professional service, and edited that winter by Jeff. Over the next two years we did additional oral histories and extensive follow-up interviewing as the manuscript went through various versions. Jeff, meanwhile, was

conducting the historical and factual research that became part of our subjects' introductions, the Afterword, and Appendixes, which he wrote at the project's conclusion in October 1986.

I feel deeply honored to have been given the personal histories—and portraits—of Locke's people for this book. This is what follows. But to best understand how they and their town survived to become the last rural Chinese town in America, it helps first to understand how it all started.

AMONG THE THOUSANDS of Chinese a month streaming into West Coast ports in the mid-nineteenth century were ancestors of many of my neighbors in Locke—grandfathers, fathers, and uncles who had come for the riches and opportunities promised in *Gum Shan*, the Golden Mountain. By the 1880s a majority of farmers and farm laborers in California were Chinese, and Chinese mining camps and fishing villages were spread the length and breadth of Oregon, Washington, and Idaho.

But then came a chapter of American history as shameful as any, and as ignored—the "Driving Out," a contagion of violence in which white mobs burned and plundered Chinese communities throughout the West. Major massacres in Los Angeles (1871), Rock Springs, Wyoming (1885), and Douglas Bar, Oregon (1885), succeeded in driving Chinese from their homes. Also in 1885, in Tacoma, Washington, Chinese workers were herded into railroad boxcars and driven from town. In 1886, residents of Seattle's Chinatown were put onto steamships and shipped to San Francisco. In California, pioneer settlements from Yreka in the north to Redlands in the south were disrupted by the Driving Out. Newspapers of the day in Calaveras and Humboldt counties, Sacramento, Chico, St. Helena, Truckee, Antioch, Calistoga, Modesto, Vacaville, and dozens more California locales all reported violent

mob action and arson against Chinese—and no legal retribution.

The Sacramento Delta was one of few western sites where Chinese escaped the violence. Here, among tule marshes and peat bogs and silty waterways, the Chinese carved a niche for themselves, hiring out for as little as ninety cents a day to reclaim the floodlands for agriculture, then developing it into the “Asparagus Capital of the World” and the major source of Bartlett pears it is today. Peaceful, hard-working, and agriculturally savvy, many of these refugees from China’s Pearl River Region stayed on as sharecroppers and farm laborers. (A fuller explanation of the Chinese contribution to California’s agriculture is provided in the Introduction by historian Sucheng Chan.) Undoubtedly the enormous fortunes made by Delta landowners, canners, and shippers helped soothe intolerance of the Chinese: until World War II, Chinese rarely made more than a dollar a day as laborers and domestic help. Also, the Chinese stayed as much to themselves as possible, living in ramshackle sections of Sacramento River towns from Rio Vista to Courtland, sending the bulk of their meager pay back to China.

As in most of the West, the Delta’s Chinese population was made up of two separate groups who had emigrated from neighboring districts in Guangdong Province in southeastern China. One group, from Sze Yap,* settled in the Delta towns of Isleton, Rio Vista, and Walnut Grove. The other, from Zhongshan district (near Macao), settled the Chinatown of Courtland, and shared the Chinatowns of Isleton and Walnut Grove with the Sze Yap. Sze Yap Chinese outnumbered Zhongshan by nearly ten to one. As was the custom, each group organized itself along language, district, or family lines into district associations, called “tongs,” in order to help Chinese get into this country, and provide assistance and protection upon their arrival. In Walnut Grove and other Delta Chinatowns, Sze Yap and Zhongshan as-

sociations were in constant competition for influence, which sometimes erupted into violence. Though these disturbances were often brief and selective in nature—one tong sending out assassins with hatchets to dispense with a nettlesome rival (from whence the term “hatchet man” has come)—the American press dubbed even minor outbreaks “Tong Wars.”

In 1915, both the Zhongshan and Sze Yap sections of Walnut Grove’s Chinatown burned to the ground. After years of less than peaceful coexistence, rather than rebuild in Walnut Grove the Zhongshan population moved upriver, where two of their countrymen had already established a saloon, a gambling hall, and a boardinghouse, and built themselves a town on land leased from the family of a landowner named George Locke. (Under terms of California’s 1913 Alien Land Act, Chinese were not allowed to own land. The law was not declared unconstitutional until 1952.) The deal between the Lockes and eight representative Zhongshan merchants was sealed with a handshake, and stipulated that the Lockes would clear nine acres of their pear orchard to make room for a new Chinese town in exchange for five dollars a month land rent for each home, ten dollars a month for commercial buildings. Originally Lockeport, the name was later shortened to Locke. The non-English-speaking Chinese began calling it “Lockee,” and still do today.

Locke, then, was born as a refuge not only from white violence, but from rival Chinese groups as well. It was the only all-Chinese town in the Delta, and the first established in the West since the Driving Out. For the next fifty years Locke remained an all-Zhongshan town,

* Although we have used *pinyin* transliteration for other Chinese place names, we have retained the traditional transliteration of Sze Yap (*pinyin* Siyi), as this is the spelling and pronunciation used by the people of Locke.

with only one tong—the Jan Ying Association—to represent its people's interests.

The people of Locke today speak with tremendous fondness and pride about the heyday of their town. And no wonder. Here was an entire town speaking the same dialect, sharing similar memories of Zhongshan, and providing a social network for the farm laborers and families of Chinese tenant farmers and sharecroppers in the rich delta lands. Almost immediately, Locke became the cultural and economic nucleus of their lives in the Golden Mountain. The Jan Ying Association helped bring additional relations into the country, or located “paper” relatives for others wishing to come. Mr. Wong Yow, Mr. Bing Fai Chow, Mrs. Jone Ho Leong, Mr. Jo Lung, and Connie Chan all had relatives who had come before them to America, establishing a network of contacts that paved their way. Most had returned to China with some savings, and stories of the work there was to be had in the Golden Mountain—and work, work, and more work. But the more work the more money, and with money, land and a retirement home could be bought in China. This dream of financial independence, a happy retirement, and honor bestowed upon the family brought many people from China during her time of economic depression and political instability, when there was virtually no opportunity for peasants to improve their lot.

The majority of Locke's first residents were single men, members of the so-called “bachelor” society who planned one day to return to China with their American earnings. For most of the year their homes were in the labor barracks in the fields, where they put in ten-hour days, six days a week for one dollar a day. Their one day off was an opportunity to get to Locke, which served the same function to these farm laborers as Dodge City did to cowpunchers. Rooms were available above the town's storefronts on Main Street or in boardinghouses for five dollars a month. Men like

Wong Yow and Bing Fai Chow would rent a room year-round in Locke, sharing it with another worker who would use it in their absence. For just \$2.50 a month they had an eight-by-ten-foot room to store their things in, and a place to sleep during the summer when they slipped into Locke for a day of rest, relaxation, and socializing.

By almost everyone's account, the town was filled with a wild vitality during the twenties and thirties. Here were Zhongshan-run markets, restaurants, boarding houses, dry-good stores, barbershops, pool halls, laundries, and gambling halls. The only white-run businesses were the town's five whorehouses, and several speakeasies during Prohibition. There was no law enforcement in Locke, white or otherwise, nor any formal governmental structure. (Locke remains an unincorporated town today.) While individuals could petition the tong for protection, to arbitrate commercial disputes, or for social matters, each business was expected to provide its own security. More than one rowdy gambler found himself flat on his back on Main Street, the victim of “Charlie” Lee Bing's Kung Fu prowess. Lee Bing's dealers also kept newspaper-covered lead pipes and brass knuckles within reach to discourage roisterous behavior; a buzzer was located on the outside front wall of the building, where a lookout was posted to warn of suspicious strangers, possible robbery attempts, or raids. The town went through significant turbulence in the early twenties, when other tongs in the region attempted to establish footholds in Locke; afterwards, it seems to have settled into a long, graceful period of self-monitored vice and cultural harmony. Only within the last decade have people started locking their doors at night, as Caucasians replace Chinese as the predominant group in town.

Surprisingly, more than the Chinatowns in the Delta, Locke became a place for families. Tommy King, whose own family moved from Walnut Grove in 1928, recalls there being be-