

HISTORIC PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF RIVERSIDE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM



TOP: MONGOL AVENUE. Left: George Wong, owner and last resident of Riverside's Chinatown, at the 1968 unveiling of the Riverside County Historical marker for Chinatown.



Throwdown in Chinatown

A Riverside developer's plans to build on the historic Chinatown site kicks up dust and swirls the town in controversy.

[by ERIN TOBIN]

A part of Riverside's past is hidden on the corner of Brockton and Tequesquite. It's called Chinatown. The site is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and is a city and county landmark and a California State Point of Historical Interest. But what was once an active village of laborers and business owners in the 1800s was slowly covered over with fill dirt. Though now a vacant lot, that lot is a hotbed of controversy. It is the proposed future site of a new medical office building, developed by Doug Jacobs Development Company in Riverside. Tied up in lawsuits, what becomes of it largely depends on a ruling by Riverside Superior Court Judge Sharon Waters.

While the future of the lot is uncertain, its past isn't. In 1871, Chinese laborers arrived with 2,000 years of knowledge on growing, harvesting and packing citrus. With that knowledge Riverside quickly became the main shipper of naval oranges to the rest of the United States. "Per capita, Riverside was the most prosperous city in the state in the heyday of the naval orange. We think that the Chinese community reflected the status of that larger community," says Vince Moses, a retired director of the Riverside Metropolitan Museum. "It did so by establishing its position as the dominant Chinatown in the Inland Empire of its day." According to Scott L. Fedick, a professor of anthropology at UC Riverside and a member of the Save Our Chinatown Committee, the Chinatown site was established in the Tequesquite Arroyo in 1885 after ordinances outlawed Chinese businesses downtown. Nicknamed Little Gom-Benn after the village in China most of the residents hailed from, the settlement grew into a 7-acre village. It consisted not only of laborers and house servants, but of laundry and restaurant owners. There were also truck farmers who grew vegetable gardens in the Santa Ana

The Players



TOP ROW, FROM LEFT Doug Jacobs; Deborah Wong; Scott Fedick; Cindy Li
BOTTOM ROW, FROM LEFT Margie Akin; Kevin Akin; James Lu; Vince Moses

PHOTOGRAPHY: JIM DORSEY & AUBREY NCELLE

riverbed and sold the produce to Riverside businesses and housewives. At its height Little Gom-Benn had more than 400 permanent residents, a population that would explode to 2,500 when tent-dwellers moved in during harvesting seasons.

By 1929, exclusion laws prohibiting Chinese males to marry white women or bring their own brides into the country had taken a toll on the community. The once vibrant village had been reduced to 12 men, half of whom were between the ages of 85 and 90.

Eventually George Wong became the owner of the Chinatown site in 1941. According to Fedick, Wong “invited construction projects to bury the archaeological remains of the site under a thick layer of protective fill.” Wong died in 1974.

The property passed from George Wong’s estate to a developer, Fedick says. But a public outcry kept building at bay. Instead, in 1984, a group of community leaders and others interested in saving the site sponsored an archaeological dig. Then-County Supervisor Norton Younglove, along with Moses and others, were involved in the project.

“The time was ripe to do that—there was so much excitement,” Moses says. “The California Council for the Humanities gave us a \$10,000 grant. That’s the most they would give anybody in 1985. Chinatown was viewed as possibly a treasure trove of information.”

Additional funds came from the County Board of Supervisors and the City Council, each providing \$20,000.

Fedick says they excavated “pockets” of the acreage and “found 15 features, foundations, trash-filled pits, all kinds of stuff. Then, the site ended up on the National Register of Historic Places.”

The developer sold the land to the Riverside County Office of Education (RCOE), which Fedick and others say had plans to de-

velop, but agreed to place the building at the other end of the property so it wouldn’t disturb the part of the site that stored the most archaeological interest.

Herein lies the controversy. In 1999, the RCOE declared the land to be surplus property. During the 90 days set aside for bids, it apparently had no offers. How the bids were solicited isn’t clear. Eight years later, Jacobs expressed interest and bid on the land. In a tentative ruling on July 9 of this year, Waters said she felt the sale may have violated state laws concerning surplus property.

With the property still in escrow, Jacobs began working with the Riverside City Council and other city agencies to get his plans for a medical complex approved for the site.

According to Fedick, “Nobody was aware they were trying to sell this property. And nobody was aware when Jacobs bought the option on the property.”

Straight-talking Jacobs doesn’t see it that way. He is focused on turning the vacant land into an office building. This is a building he says the city needs, mentioning a recent study stating Riverside is greatly underserved when it comes to health care. With approval from the city council and other city agencies, he is ready to move the project along.

“Everyone is supportive. I’m bringing in a new, high-quality medical center,” Jacobs says. “We need these facilities.”

Yet, some people think nothing could justify constructing a new building on a historical landmark.

“There are a lot of historic Chinatowns, but Riverside’s is extremely important,” says Margie Akin, a local archaeologist and member of the Save Our Chinatown committee. “It was a well-respected center for many of the Chinatowns in surrounding cities...it is puzzling what the city council doesn’t get about this.”

Local Drama

Moses, who runs a historical preservation consulting business, was notified about the plans to build at the Chinatown site. He shared the information with members of the Riverside branch of the San Diego Huaxia Chinese School, which offers children's classes on Chinese language and culture at John W. North High School. Most of the parents and teachers at the school had no idea Riverside had a Chinatown, but were motivated to preserve what was left. They were joined by others from the community, like James Lu, the chair of Modern Languages and Literature at California Baptist University.

"When I first saw the Chinatown site, it was a wasteland and it made my heart ache," Lu says. "I had been here 15 years, and the first I heard of it was when I got involved with this movement. Nothing had been done to it. My first instinct was, 'We can't allow this. We have to tell the story, tell everyone there used to be a Chinatown.'"

Organized as the Riverside Chinese Community Preservation Committee, the group presented the city with an alternative proposal that would retain the site's status as a historical landmark. Jacobs agreed to give

the building a modern Chinese design, devote part of the lobby to informative displays explaining the history of the site and leave room for a Chinese Garden with a memorial walk that would explain the Chinese laborers' role in history of the city. Jacobs also agreed to pay for an environmental consulting firm, chosen by the city, to oversee all aspects of the project. In October, 2008, the city council approved Jacobs' building plans. While the preservation committee wasn't able to get this building moved away from the site completely, many felt the changes honored the site's past.

"We were a community trying to reach out as much as possible," says Cindy Li, who has been involved with the preservation committee from the beginning. "We did all we can within the system and we learned the system has a place for public input."

But, for some members of the group, this wasn't enough. Deborah Wong (no relation to George Wong) helped form the Save our Chinatown Committee, which includes Akin and Fedick, and separated it from the preservation committee. Wong, a professor at UC Riverside, has published research on the role

Asian-Americans have played in California and is regarded as an expert on the topic. In an effort to stop all building on the site, the Save Our Chinatown Committee filed a lawsuit against the City of Riverside and the RCOE in November. But the threat of a lawsuit didn't scare off Jacobs.

"They think if they can stop me, I'll go away, but I'm not going away," Jacobs says.

Instead, Jacobs pressed forward. Armed with city approval and the proper permits, he had crews with earth-moving equipment begin to remove the layers of fill dirt that buried the site. Archaeologists were on hand to supervise the work and document anything found. When the work went on through Sunday and Presidents' Day, a federal holiday, police issued Jacobs citations for noise violations. He chose to work through the weekend because he knew Wong's lawyer was working on a restraining order to stop him, he says.

"I had more to gain than I had to lose," Jacobs says. "We had a window of opportunity to work, so I thought let's get to work."

Outside the lot, Wong and her group were horrified by the activity, and they organized

