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Not My Fault: A story of two Chinatowns.

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A rare photograph of San Francisco's Chinatown shows the morning of April 18, 1906. The fire can be seen in the background and by midnight, all the buildings here would be burnt-out husks. The earthquake damage in this area was primarily non-structural; most buildings survived the shaking relatively intact. (Photo courtesy of the Chinese Historical Society of America in San Francisco)

Today is the dedication of Eureka's Chinatown Monument in Old Town. The Monument at the corner of First and E Streets remembers the forced expulsion of more than 300 people of Chinese ancestry in 1885. The expulsion was an ugly chapter in Eureka's history and today's dedication is a step in acknowledging what happened.

The Eureka expulsion was not an isolated incident in late 19th century America. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 suspended the immigration of Chinese workers and prohibited Chinese immigrants from becoming U.S. citizens. The only exception was the small number of babies born on American soil who gained birthright citizenship under the 14th amendment.

Some states passed far more discriminatory laws. California revised its state constitution in 1879, adding Article XIX "To Protect the State from Certain Aliens." This article prohibited land ownership, banned the hiring of "Mongolian or Chinese workers," and allowed cities to regulate areas of residency or expel Chinese to areas outside the city limits. Eureka was not the first

California city to exploit this latter clause, but it became arguably one of the most well-known because of how thoroughly it was carried out.

We don't know much about what happened to the Chinese after they were forced onto ships the morning of February 8, 1885, and landed in San Francisco a day later. The Bay Area had a thriving Chinese community and a robust internal governance system supported by business and trade organizations. The expelled group from Eureka were likely met by Chinese community groups and provided with emergency housing. They had been given only a day's notice in Eureka to gather their belongings and most had few resources.

I imagine that many of the former Eureka were assimilated into San Francisco's Chinatown, the largest Chinese community in the western hemisphere at the time. The official U.S. census of 1900 lists just under 14,000 Chinese in San Francisco but many historians estimate at least 30,000, the number undercounted because of government mistrust and fear of deportation. Regardless of number, there is no question that the 15-block area that comprised Chinatown was the most densely populated area of the city.

The Eureka refugees who stayed in San Francisco were hit by a second catastrophe 21 years later. The ground began to shake violently at 5:12 AM on April 18, 1906. Many in Chinatown were already awake as their jobs required early morning rising. The Chinese Historical Society of America Museum in San Francisco includes many eyewitness accounts, newspaper accounts, letters and other primary materials about the Chinatown experience.

I visited the museum with my daughter Clara in 2004. She had chosen the 1906 Chinatown experience as her 8th Grade History Day Project. We read too many accounts to include here but several give a sense of what the shaking was like - strong but not catastrophic. Jessie Lee Quon recalled seeing pots and pans flying off kitchen shelves and Mrs. Lee Yoke Suey described cracks opening in the ceiling. There is no detailed assessment of the shaking damage in Chinatown, but survivor descriptions and the few photographs taken before fire overtook the area show buildings still standing and suggest no major damage.

Headlines about the San Francisco earthquake give the impression of a single fire that began immediately after the shaking stopped. In reality, at least 52 separate fires sprang up throughout the City over several hours following the earthquake, triggered by severed gas lines, damaged furnaces, and overturned lanterns and stoves. Some sputtered and died out but others merged to become an inferno.

The earthquake ruptured water lines throughout San Francisco making it impossible to fight the fires. The mayor, SF Fire officials, and military officials at the Presidio decided to use explosives to create fire breaks. Beginning four hours after the earthquake, crews systematically dynamited entire city blocks from the Financial District west to Van Ness Avenue and south into the Mission District.

The untrained demolition crews used black powder instead of demolition-grade dynamite and the operation triggered more blazes than it deterred. By early evening, the fires had coalesced and reached Chinatown. Explosives were detonated along its border in a last-ditch attempt to slow the conflagration. The result was disastrous, and the entire area was soon completely in flames.

I surmise the Eureka expellees and those expelled from other towns once again found themselves fleeing with only the few items they could carry. The survivors gathered in many areas of the City, only to be repeatedly displaced by anti-Chinese sentiments. The U.S. Army established 26 official refugee camps, but the Chinese were only allowed in one segregated area near the Presidio. When nearby property owners complained about their presence, the Chinese were relocated to the military parade grounds above Fort Point. Stories about the mistreatment of Chinese refugees made their way to President Theodore Roosevelt who directed his Secretary of War to tell Presidio officials that "Government supplies must be furnished and Government protection afforded to all alike and all suffering relieved without regard to nationality." There is little evidence that the treatment of displaced Chinese changed.

Some San Francisco politicians and business owners had looked for ways to eradicate Chinatown long before the earthquake. Aside from the racism of the time, it occupied prime real estate in the heart of downtown that many felt could be used for a better purpose. The Burnham Plan for San Francisco was commissioned in 1904 by a group of wealthy white business owners to redesign the City in the style of Paris with wide, radiating boulevards, a massive city center, and terraced hillside parks. In the plan, Chinatown would be condemned and leveled.

One might think that the earthquake would be a good starting point to implement the Burnham plan, and a number of influential San Franciscans including Mayor Eugene Schmitz and James Phelan, a prominent banker and future U.S. Senator, made moves to put it into action. Reality soon set in and issues of property ownership, pressures to rebuild quickly, and the huge expense of reconstruction, led the Board of Supervisors to officially drop the plan less than a month later.

One aspect of the Burnham plan not abandoned was eliminating Chinatown. Only days after the earthquake, Mayor Schmitz created the Committee on the Location of Chinatown, advocating permanent relocation to an area on the city outskirts near Hunters Point. To encourage relocation, the City refused to restore water, gas, or electric power to any businesses run by Chinese and denied building permits to Chinese landlords, even refusing to allow them to remove rubble.

The economic clout, ingenuity, and resilience of the Chinese community stymied the plan. Fewer than 10% of Chinatown properties were owned by birthright citizens or Chinese corporations. But the Chinese presented a united front to their white landlords, making it clear that if forced out, the owners would lose millions of dollars in rent. The final straw came from the Chinese government. A prominent corner of Chinatown was owned by the Dowager Empress of China and housed the Chinese Consulate. The Consulate and a Chinese trade consortium filed a federal lawsuit and the court ruled that San Francisco had no jurisdiction over a foreign country's property. The plan to re-zone Chinatown fell apart and rebuilding began.

Chinese-run corporations quickly signed contracts for debris removal and began constructing a new Chinatown. Funded entirely by contributions from Chinese American merchants, international loans, a few wealthy white supporters, and the Empress herself, Chinatown was fully rebuilt in under two years, about a fifth the time it took many other parts of the City to recover. Look Tin Eli, a birthright citizen born in Mendocino, is credited for the appearance of today's Chinatown, changing its drab, utilitarian buildings that were no different than many other parts of the city into the brightly painted exteriors, with balconies and pagodas that characterize the area today.

The rift between white San Franciscans and the Chinese community continued long after the earthquake. Federal and state laws based on race were repealed but fissures remained. In 1919, a group of earthquake survivors gathered on April 18th to commemorate the tragedy. It became an annual tradition until 2016 when the last of the group passed on. Chinatown survivors were notably absent until Bessie Shum attended in 2000. She was 96 and Mayor Willie Brown used the occasion to issue an official apology to the Chinese community for how they were treated before and after the earthquake.

Apologies are always better late than never. The City of Eureka never formally apologized about the events of 1885. But providing the land for the Eureka Chinatown Monument and fully supporting its construction and message are actions that speak louder than words. The past can't be changed but owning up to it and pledging fairness for all is the best way to move forward.

Note: Special thanks to historians Alex Service and Jean Pfaelzer for correcting my errors. Visit the Humboldt Asian and Pacific Islanders in Solidarity web site at <https://www.hapihumboldt.org/> for background of the Eureka Chinatown Monument. The Chinese Historical Society of America site <https://chsa.org/earthquake/> provides personal stories of the impacts of the 1906 earthquake and Jean Pfaelzer's book, *Driven Out: The Forgotten War Against Chinese Americans* provides historic perspective on the expulsion efforts of the late 19th century.

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