

*The following article is intended to give an update on Riverside's Chinatown and the efforts to preserve an important cultural and historical site.*

## Riverside Chinatown Rescue Efforts Continue

The Riverside, California Chinatown was one of the more important Chinatowns in Southern California in the last few decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> and into early 20<sup>th</sup> century. For a time, Riverside was the most prosperous town in the whole country due to the development of the citrus industry. Although the farmers who established the town tried dozens of crops in their newly acquired properties, it wasn't until the Chinese workers became involved that the citrus crops became successful enough to support the economy of the emerging city and some of its neighbors.

The Chinese workers, who had been released from the construction of the railroads, the draining of the Sacramento delta and other projects, brought their knowledge of how to care for and successfully ship citrus to the city. As a result, they had a particularly prosperous community until the effects of the Exclusion Acts caused their population to dwindle. The last resident, George Wong, died in 1974, and by that time few buildings remained, and they were soon razed. But in their filled-in cellars, privy pits and trash pits remained a valuable archaeological treasure.

The Save Our Chinatown Committee (SOCC) was organized by local community members when a developer's plans for a medi-

cal office building became public. There had been a scholarly partial excavation of the site in 1984-5 and an effort to establish a park around 1990 that fell through when the County Board of Education refused to sell the property at the agreed-upon price (which was matched by a grant from the State). Now the members of the SOCC and their supporters have fought their way through dozens of Planning Commission meetings, City Council and Cultural Heritage Board meetings, and finally a lawsuit in their efforts to protect the site. Efforts are now concentrated on protecting the site from further damage after the developer violated his permits and proceeded with heavy grading during the "Valentine's Day Massacre," when at least 12 pieces of heavy equipment were used to "prepare" the site during a three-day holiday weekend.

Preliminary injunctions have stopped the work until a judge decides if the sale of the land (which is still in escrow) was a violation of several laws and of a "minute order" requiring that the land be used only for educational purposes, and if the city violated the law in rejecting the pleas of experts and community members that the EIR require moving the building from the core of the site. The case is complicated, but the archaeological site is an important one.

It has been recognized as an

historic place of interest on federal, state and local levels. The 1984-5 excavation of a portion of the site, which included the recovery of 3 tons of artifacts, has been used in the number one archaeology textbook in use in the US today as an example of how much information can be gleaned from a fairly recent historic archaeology site.

The Save Our Chinatown Committee is looking for support in several forms. In addition to the ever-present need for money, especially the expenses of a trial, they are looking for letters of support from individuals and organizations that can be presented to the City of Riverside and other interested parties. Go to the website [www.SaveOurChinatown.org](http://www.SaveOurChinatown.org) to get more detailed information on how to send letter of support, or for information about the trial on July 9<sup>th</sup>. If you want to send a request to be put on the e-mail list for regular updates, or just to ask questions, you can write to [www.saveourchinatown@yahoo.org](mailto:www.saveourchinatown@yahoo.org).

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