

Ching Lee Laundry

Long History

It was an entirely different era when Ching Lee Laundry opened in 1876, a time when Chinese immigrants were excluded from virtually everything. Tens of thousands of Chinese had already migrated to California by that time; the Yee family settled in San Mateo — when the population was just 932, a village, not yet a formal city.

San Mateo's Chinese community probably started in 1870 when Alvinza Hayward hired 150 Chinese laborers to run a water line to his estate. An informal Chinatown began to coalesce around B Street and Second Avenue with a rooming house, restaurant, and at least three wash-houses.



Albert Yee hand ironing shirts



San Mateo - 1888



1st Av and C Street (Claremont)

By 1900 the community had dwindled due to the Chinese exclusion laws. A second Chinese district developed around the Hop Yick Company on First and Claremont (then C Street), interspersed with some Japanese businesses. Most of the merchant immigrants were from Taishan and Huangliang Du. During this period Chinese growers carried cut flowers to San Francisco in reed baskets taking the train or the streetcar line that ran from San Mateo to San Francisco. This Chinatown mostly disappeared before World War II.

The Ching Lee Laundry endured for generations, and was the oldest Chinese laundry in the United States, when it closed. People visited the laundry not only for laundry service, but to exchange news. Similar to a pub, so much life went through the front door, as they befriended the community with the generations of families who patronized the business. This testifies to how far Chinese immigrants have come, overcoming alienation, poverty, segregation, discrimination, and bigotry to become Americans. Perseverance and dedication not just to the business itself but also to the community it has been part of, the laundry shop's name translates to "victory" in Cantonese.