

WALLA WALLA'S CHINATOWN

Once the largest Chinese Community in Eastern Washington

The first Chinese came to Walla Walla and the Pacific Northwest as part of the Idaho gold rush of the 1860's. After the Idaho mining boom died down, the immigrants moved to work on the railroads or at other pursuits. Construction on the Walla Walla and Columbia River Railroad began in 1871, with several groups of Chinese employed in grading the line. Upon completion of the WW&CRR, many Chinese laborers settled in Walla Walla, resulting in a large increase in the Chinese population here.

During the 1880's, Walla Walla experienced another wave of immigration from China. Those who settled here during that period were generally small businessmen, domestic workers, and truck farmers. Chinese enterprises included laundries, dry goods stores, restaurants, and medicine shops. In 1882, for example, Walla Walla had nine Chinese laundries; in 1907, Chinese businesses included ten specializing in imported merchandise, two druggists, one grocer, six laundries, one medicine manufacturer and three restaurants, in addition to twenty-five Chinese truck gardens.

As the Chinese population grew steadily from the mid-1860's until its peak in the 1880's, the Chinese, as other immigrants have done, tended to migrate to a centralized neighborhood. The first Chinatown in Walla Walla was centered around the Oriental Hotel, and included the area along Alder and adjoining streets from approximately Colville to Third. The fire of 1887 destroyed this area along with much of the rest of Walla Walla's downtown.

Most of Walla Walla's Chinese population eventually moved to a variety of locations along Rose and the adjoining streets between Second and Sixth. In 1911, prominent members of the Chinese community built the Pacific Enterprise Building at the corner of Fifth & Rose, where it is reported that ninety percent of the Chinese population of Walla Walla lived the early part of the 20th century. The structure became known locally as "the Chinese Building," and housed a variety of commercial businesses on the street level including laundries and Chinese medicine shops, as well as numerous apartments on the upper level. The Pacific Enterprise Corporation functioned as a form of quasi-government that set rules and regulations,

resolved differences between Chinese, cared for the needy and infirm, and acted as liaison with the outside community.

In 1947, the Pacific Enterprise Building was purchased by a local non-Chinese businessman, who closed the residential portion, forcing approximately ninety Chinese inhabitants to find housing among the general population. On February 9, 1947, the Walla Walla Union-Bulletin reported, "...By the end of the year, Chinatown, as modern people know it will be no more. Buildings in the colony on Rose and Fifth and Sixth have been sold, and the exodus of occupants to China will begin February 15. Before the year is ended about 50 will have left."

The majority of the Chinese in Walla Walla in 1947 had come to the United States as young men in search of adventure and wealth and hadn't intended to stay, so they hadn't set down roots or married. When the Chinese Building was sold, even though they had aged here, very few felt they had any alternative but to return to China. However, a small community of younger Chinese who had formed families has remained here, and has integrated into our general population.

In the historical photo of the Chinatown area below, the Walla Walla City Hall constructed in 1908 is in upper left hand corner next to the city fire station. Prior to construction of those buildings, the Chinese businesses located there included Charles Ong, Chinese Restaurant, Quing Mow Luong & Co, Hong Chong Wo Co, Kwong Wah Sang & Co, and Kee Sang Tong, all Chinese merchandisers. Kwong Chung Sing Co, owner Charles Tung, was located on the northwest corner of the City Hall block at Fourth & Rose. The two story Bing Kong Bow Leoung Chinese Lodge Building is shown on the southwest corner of the City Hall block.

On the northwest corner of the next block at Fifth & Rose is the Pacific Enterprise Building. Several Chinese residences are on the south side of the next block as well as on the north side of Rose.



Fourth of July Parade, 1912



Walla Walla's Final Chinatown on Rose Street from Third to Sixth, Pacific Enterprise "Chinese Building" in foreground at Fifth & Rose, residences between Fifth & Sixth