

This block of Palm Street was once home to a lively Asian community, including Chinese and Filipinos. Founded in the 1860s by immigrants from southern China, this early “Chinatown” was active and vital until the 1940s and known to its residents as “Tong Yung Fow” (Chinese People’s City), and to other townspeople as “Palm Street.”

With the help of Wong On (Ah Louis), a merchant and labor contractor who was also Palm Street’s unofficial mayor, these early ground breakers established businesses to serve the county’s Chinese population as well as the greater county-wide community. By making opportunities for themselves they created a thriving Chinatown made up of merchants, labor organizers, business owners, physicians, salespeople, craftspeople, and farmers. Their businesses included the all-purpose Ah Louis Store, restaurants, grocery stores, and boarding houses.



Above: Gon Ying, or “Silver Dove”, wife of Ah Louis, came with her new husband to San Luis Obispo in 1889 after they met and were married in San Francisco. She was 20 years old at the time, he was 47. They had 8 children together over the following 20 years.



Wong On, also known as Ah Louis, shown here in 1920, was born in Guangdong China in 1840. He came to California in 1860 and arrived in San Luis Obispo in 1870.

Photos courtesy of the San Luis Obispo County History Center unless otherwise credited

The north side of Palm Street at about 1930. The “Ah Louis Store” (above), was owned and operated by Chinatown pioneer Wong On, known as Ah Louis. The store sold food, medicine, fireworks, and goods imported from China and Japan.

The new Ah Louis Store building, built in 1884 with bricks from his own brickyard, replaced an earlier 1874 wooden structure. The Louis family residence and a small Taoist Temple occupied the second story above the store.

The two-story building in the middle of the block was a boarding house for male Chinese workers. Other wooden buildings along Palm Street included shops, a laundry, a café and small residences.





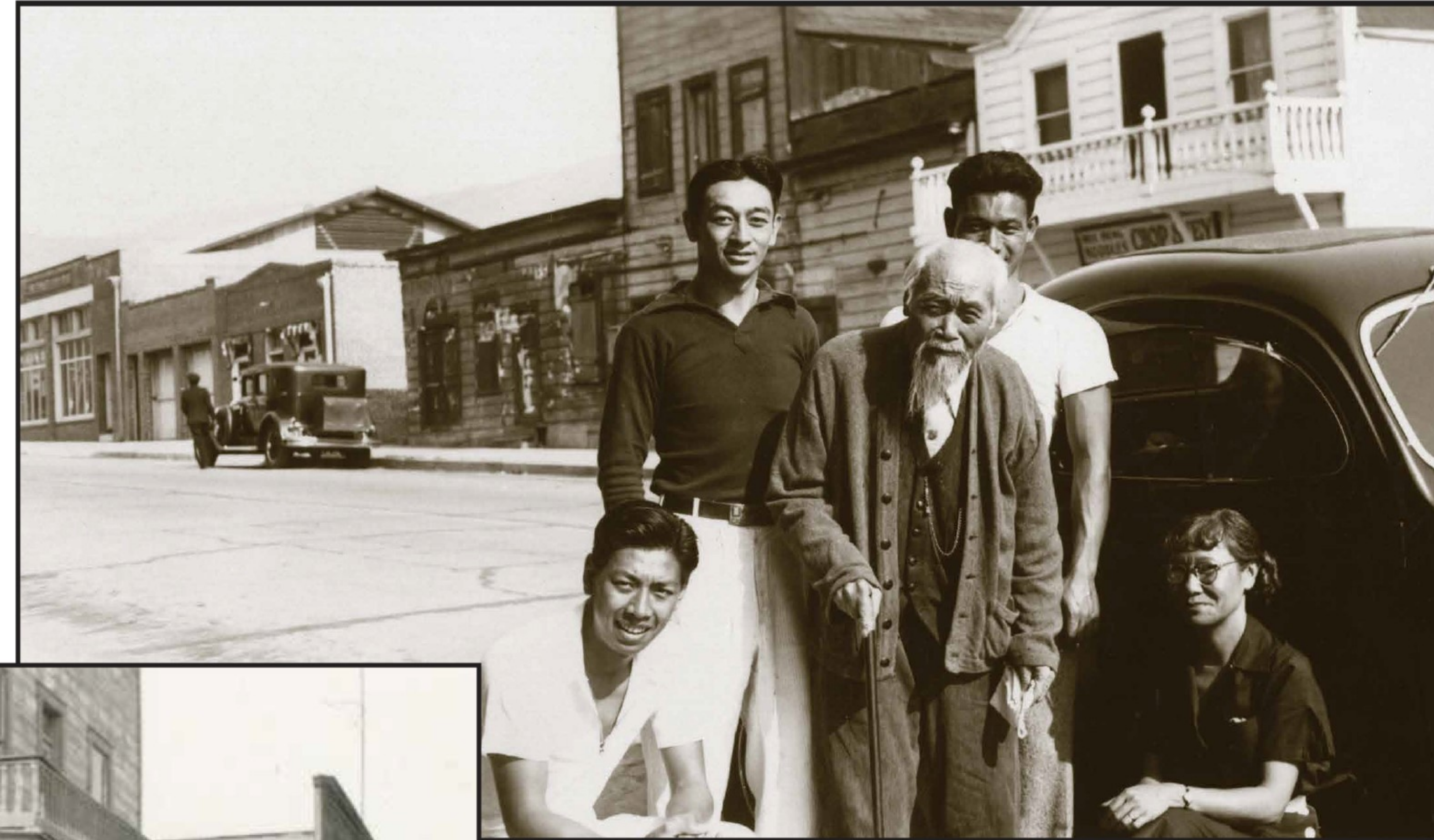
Welcome to San Luis Obispo's HISTORIC CHINATOWN



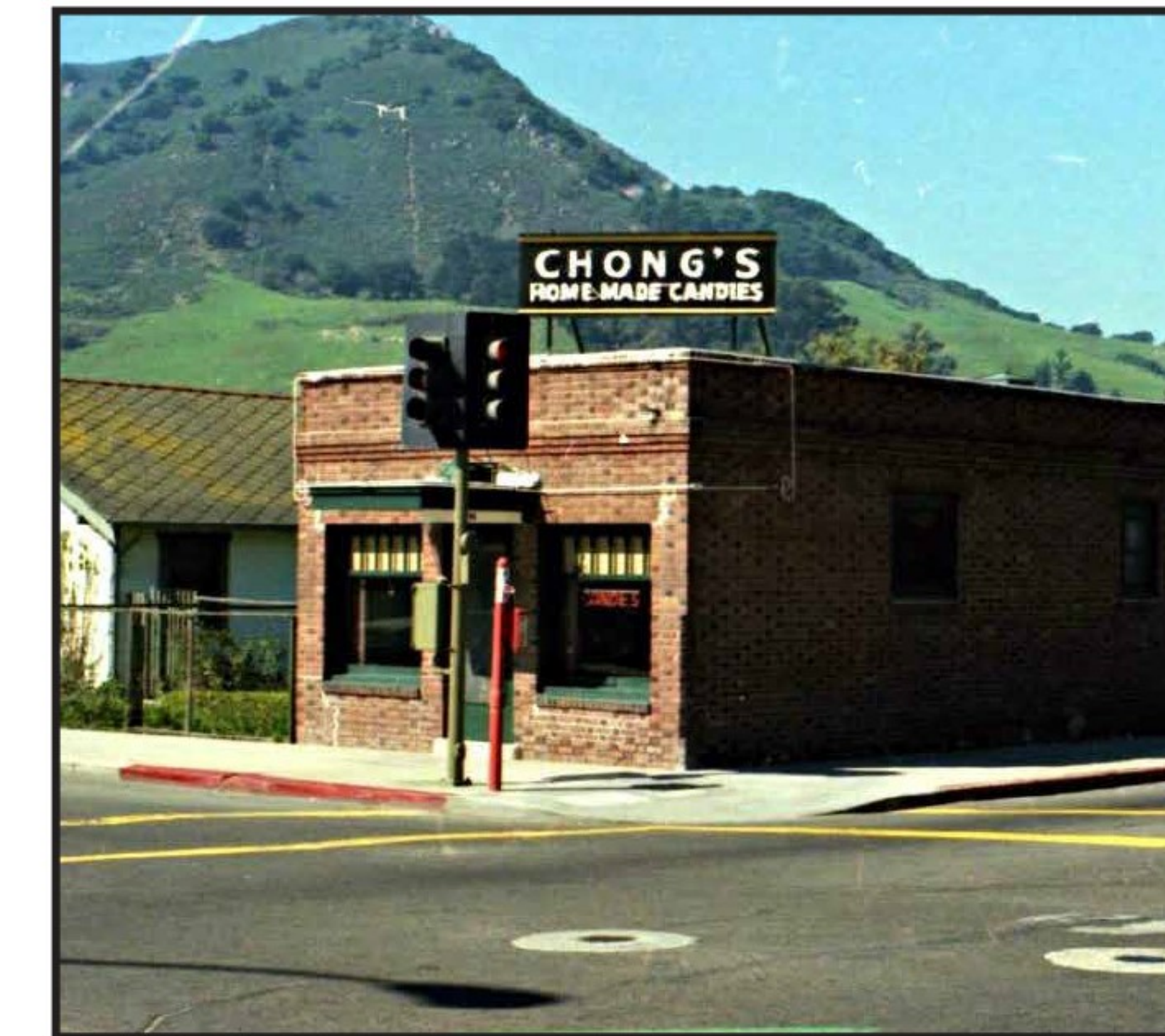
The Chinese often encountered racism and discrimination, especially through the Chinese Exclusion Act beginning in the 1880s. By the 1930s, Palm Street's Chinese population had dwindled in numbers. While most of the buildings changed ownership or were demolished in the 1950s, a few still stand and are owned by descendants of those early founding families.



The Yee Chung & Co. store on the south side of Palm Street. The store was owned by a group of Chinese men including Gin Tut Wing, Gin Get Sun, Gin Yim, Gin Hong Gin, Gin Get Shew, and Gin Hung Poy. After the passage of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, which restricted immigration of Chinese laborers, many workers pooled their money to operate as a merchant partnership. Merchants, teachers, and scholars were less restricted under the Exclusion Act.



Above: Howard Louis stands with his father Ah Louis and other family members on Palm Street in 1936. Chinese owned businesses line the street behind them.



Addison and Mary Chong built and opened a Chinese Noodle House known as "Chong's Cafe" in this building at 778 Palm Street in 1927. The cafe operated for nearly 28 years. In 1954, Addison's younger brother Richard Chong, converted the building into a popular candy kitchen and store. Mr. Chong operated the store until his death in 1978.

In the 1980s, before this parking structure was built, archaeologists excavated this area to learn more about the life of Palm Street's early inhabitants. On the next level of this parking structure you can see a display about what was found. There are many other ways to explore SLO's historic Chinatown District – signs, plaques, artwork, and buildings related to "Tong Yung Fow" still exist today.



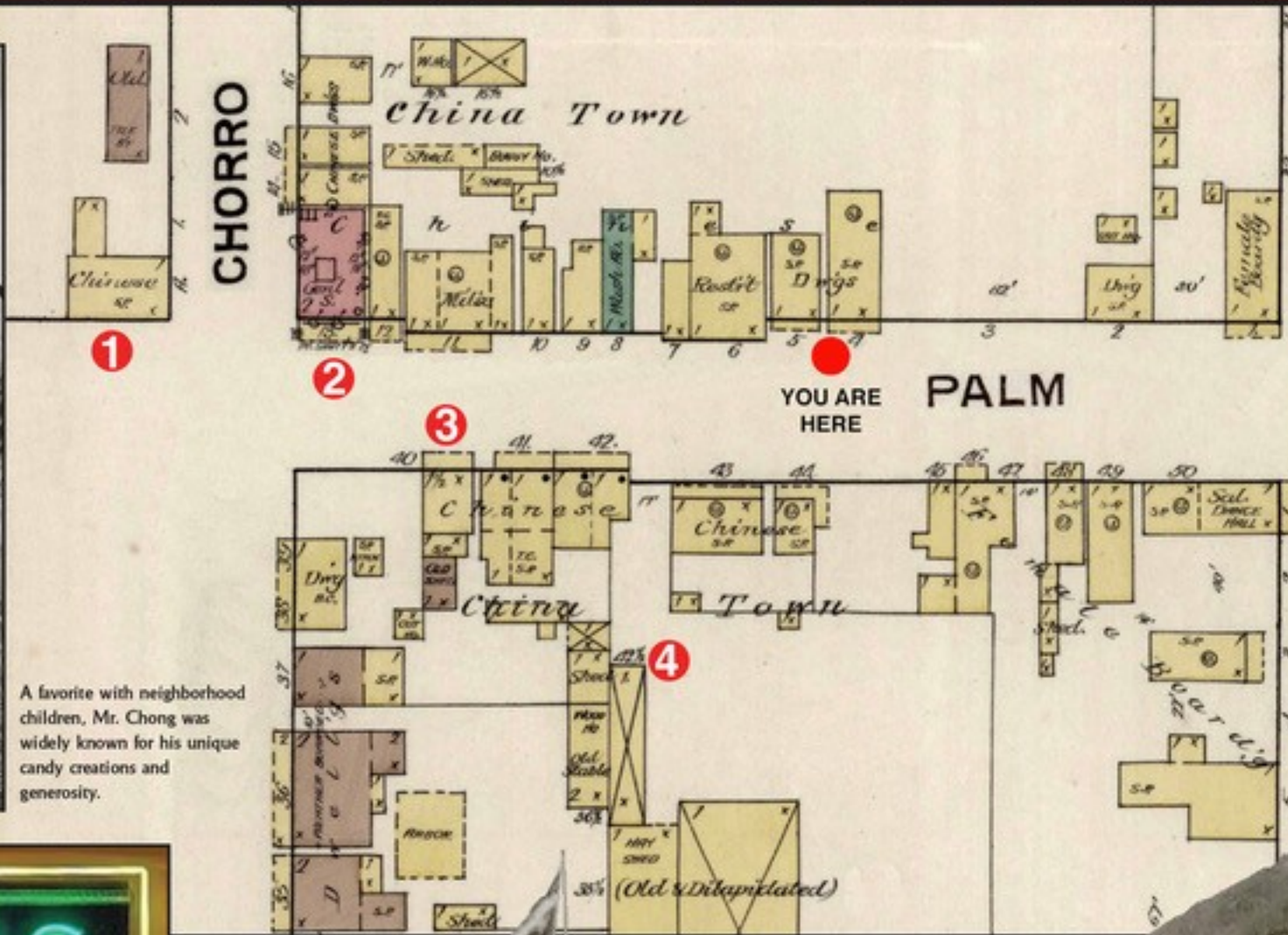
Left: The Ah Louis Store served as a central meeting site for many social and festive gatherings as seen here.



1977 Photo: Alex Gough



A favorite with neighborhood children, Mr. Chong was widely known for his unique candy creations and generosity.



Chinatown in 1888 as shown on the Sanborn Fire Insurance map of the time. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

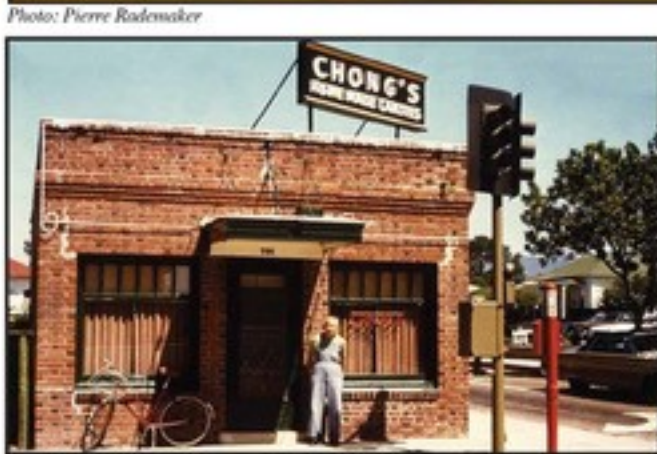
- 1 Chong's Candies Location
- 2 Ah Louis Store
- 3 Yee Ghung & Co. Store Location
- 4 Chumash Era Stone Aqueduct

The City of San Luis Obispo acknowledges that the land on which the city sits and the surrounding county carry the heritage and culture of the Indigenous Peoples, which includes yak t'it'u t'it'u yak t'it'ui Northern Chumash Tribe San Luis Obispo County and the Salinan Tribe. We honor the Indigenous Communities' connection to the territories and respect the land on which we live and learn.

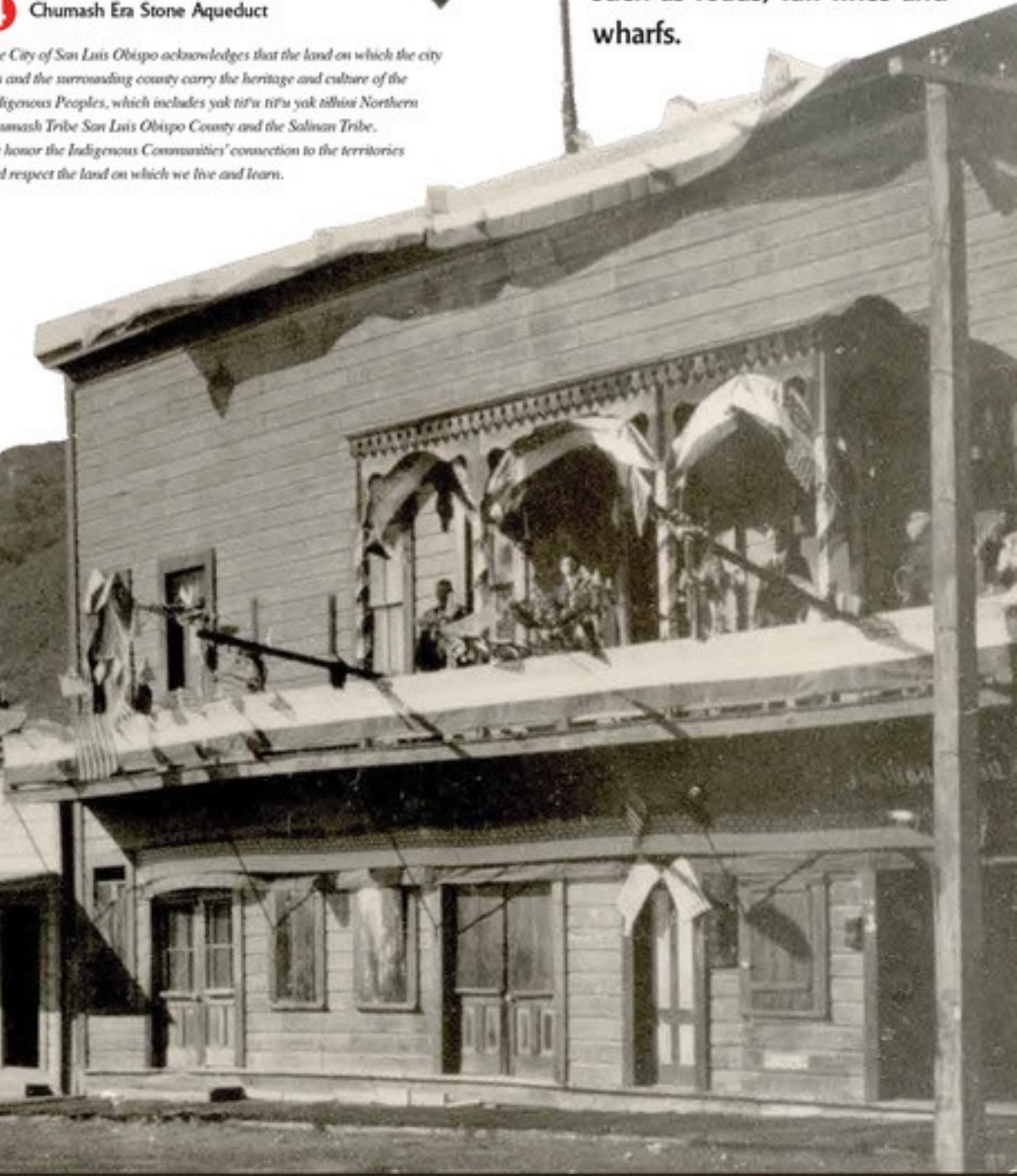
San Luis Obispo's Chinese population had a significant impact throughout the County. They provided the labor to construct many community improvements such as roads, rail lines and wharfs.



The restored neon sign mounted on the wall above was originally located a half block away identifying Richard Chong's Candy Shop.



View of the North side of Palm Street in 1919 looking toward San Luis Mountain.



The building above housed the Quong Chong Grocery Store owned by Gin Sai Yuen. Upstairs was the location of a small Chinese school founded by Ah Louis as well as a small Chinese temple.