IMMIGRANTS HELP LAY VALLEY FOUNDATIONS LIKE THE EARLY CHINESE, MANY FLED OPPRESSION FOR CALIFORNIA

San Jose Mercury News (California)

June 20, 2001 Wednesday MORNING FINAL EDITION

Section: SPECIAL SECTION; Pg. 30S

Length: 1356 words

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Body

A century and a quarter before the moniker Silicon ***Valley*** became worldwide parlance, the ***immigrant***-driven ***valley*** was already as much a state of mind as a piece of rich earth.

Like all of the people who lived in the part of the world that later became ***California***, the residents of the Santa Clara ***Valley*** in the mid-19th century lived in a rustic, parochial place.

James Wilson Marshall's discovery of gold at Coloma in 1848, of course, changed everything. The ***valley***'s easy pace became a frenzy as argonauts from the four corners of the Earth and every nook and cranny of the United States descended upon the region.

About the same time, however, forces abroad that had nothing to do with precious metals turned the Santa Clara ***Valley*** into a kind of international experiment that is still taking shape.

Often, the new arrivals from overseas and Latin America have been the victims of war and its aftermath.

In 1850, the Taiping Rebellion against the Manchus began in China. The rebellion, which grew out of social and economic upheaval, plunged the country into 14 years of civil war in which about 20 million died.

About 100,000 ***Chinese*** became ***California***'s first "boat people" as refugees flooded into the state after disembarking from huge ***Chinese*** junks. Hundreds of ***Chinese*** settled in the ***valley***.

They worked 12-hour days at the New Almaden Quicksilver Mine outside San Jose. They did railroad labor, building San Jose's Southern Pacific rail station and the first rail link between San Jose and San Francisco.

One of the most momentous events in the ***valley***'s immigration history occurred more than a century later after the country lost its first war. In

April 1975, when the U.S.-backed government in Saigon fell to invading North Vietnamese forces, tens of thousands of terrified strangers came to a new land.

In the late '70s, Cambodian refugees ***fled*** the killing fields of fanatical communists trying to turn their country back to the Year Zero. A few years later, civil war in El Salvador and other Central American countries drove tens of thousands to flee their homes and settle in the greater Bay Area.

But from the beginning, the state and the Santa Clara ***Valley*** often looked more ***like*** a cracked mosaic than a melting pot.

Take the ***California*** Foreign Miners Tax, enacted in 1852. More than half of the 49ers were ***immigrants***, but only the Latino and Asian miners were taxed. Europeans were exempt.

One in four of the 49ers was ***Chinese***, generating enormous revenue for the state in the 1860s and 1870s, said Paul Fong, an Evergreen ***Valley*** College professor and authority on the ***valley***'s ethnic history.

Still, miners of all ethnicities often seemed to get along fine, at least on the surface.

"***Chinese*** Sam" was one of the most popular residents of the New Almaden Quicksilver Mine several miles from downtown San Jose. When Sam, head cook at one of the mine's boarding houses, died in February 1889, his fellow workers, most of them white, raised money to send his body back to his ancestral home.

The miners ***liked*** him even though he had killed a co-worker who had tried to take over his job by underhanded means. Sam was tried for murder but was released after several months in jail because "he only killed another ***Chinese*** man -- and he was an excellent cook," according to historical writer Mary Hallock Foote.

That kind of underlying racism drove ***California***'s white-dominated labor unions to push Congress to pass the ***Chinese*** Exclusion Act. The 1882 legislation was designed to halt the flow of "Celestials" into the state.

Ironically, though, the xenophobia that led to the ***Chinese*** Exclusion Act led to a mass migration of Japanese later in 1880s because ***California*** industrialists and farm owners still demanded cheap labor.

Many of those Japanese laborers rose from farmworkers to farm owners. In the ***valley***, they planted tomatoes and strawberries. They also ***laid*** the ***foundation*** of the area's flower-growing industry, further beautifying the ***valley*** with roses, carnations and chrysanthemums.

The state Legislature responded with the Alien Land Act of 1913 after white growers and shippers complained. "So the first generation of Japanese ended up as tenant farmers -- having to lease land," said Alex Yamato, a professor in Asian-American studies at San Jose State University. "But

they couldn't go back to Japan because the Japanese wouldn't accept their children, because they were born

in America."

During the first couple of decades

of the new century, ***immigrants*** continued to pour into the state -- mostly from Europe. The new arrivals included Genovese fishermen and their families to the bays of Monterey and San Francisco; Portuguese-speaking second sons from the Azores, unable

to inherit the small family plots left

to older brothers; sheep-herding Basques in the hills near Los Gatos; Jews fleeing pogroms in Eastern

Europe, Germans, Irish.

It wasn't until around 1920 that European immigration began to decline, and peoples from around the Pacific Rim again set their sights on ***California***. Filipinos came to the ***valley***, as did Sikhs from India and Samoans and other Pacific Islanders.

But in 1924, Congress, with a wary eye on ***California***, panicked and passed an immigration law that remained on the books for six decades, putting strict quotas on peoples from Asia and Latin America. Asians were banned from becoming citizens.

The next big population wave came during the '30s, when hundreds of thousands of Dust Bowl refugees got their fix on Route 66 as they headed toward the ***California*** cornucopia.

Migration also brought more blacks to the state. The relatively small numbers of African-Americans soared during and after World War II as jobless laborers sought work in shipyards and airplane factories. Soldiers and sailors, ***many*** of them black, came back to live near the ***California*** bases where they had spent boot camp.

After Hitler and Hirohito were defeated, immigration slowed, and thevalley's orchards were turned into tract home developments and industrial parks.

"It was 'Leave It To Beaver' and the Beach Boys," recalled Fong, 48, whose family emigrated from China when he was 3.

The nearly 6-foot Fong, a quarterback for Sunnyvale High, could have assimilated with a smile. But he chose not to. The self-professed "tough guy" hung out with gang members and fought the "model minority" stereotype.

"It was horrible being Asian, being a minority," Fong recalled. "There was harassment. There were hate crimes."

The state's demographics began to change significantly after Congress passed the U.S. Immigration Act of 1965, dropping ethnic quotas favoring immigration from Europe.

Assimilated Japanese-Americans were replaced by newer groups, particularly the Vietnamese.

The 1975 collapse of Saigon couldn't have happened at a better time economically for the emigres. It came a few years after the birth of the microprocessor.

Former anti-Vietnam war radicals getting rich from garage start-ups began hiring thousands of anti-communist Vietnamese. And Vietnamese who had ended up in such frigid places such as St. Paul, Minn., and Madison, Wis., soon followed the sun and the silicon to the ***valley***.

Big Silicon ***Valley*** firms began hunting for engineering talent when they couldn't find enough in American universities. Workers came from Taiwan, Hong Kong, India, Pakistan and Iran.

"You can't say what a Californian looks ***like*** these days," said Kevin Starr, the state's librarian and author of several books on the state. "He or she looks ***like*** the world. And particularly in well-off, well-educated places ***like*** the Santa Clara ***Valley***, people don't have to shed their identities to enter the common culture."

Because of the rising Latino and soaring Asian populations, by the late '90s the ***valley*** had no ethnic or racial majority, as the white population dropped below 50 percent.

"Overall, this is the greatest place in the world to live," said Fong, president of the board of trustees for the Foothill-De Anza Community College District. "Most of the negatives are in the past. Now we can move ahead, together."

Notes

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Graphic

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PHOTO: PAULINE LUBENS -- MERCURY NEWS ARCHIVES

REMEMBERING THE PAST

Tu Vo, who emigrated from Vietnam in 1992, was one of the ***many*** Vietnamese-Americans who gathered at St. James Park in San Jose on April 30, 2000, to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the fall of Saigon.

PHOTO: RICK E. MARTIN -- MERCURY NEWS ARCHIVES

A NEW AMERICAN

Jennifer Montemayor, 7, and more than 100 other children became U.S. citizens at a ceremony in San Jose in March.

PHOTO: GARY REYES -- MERCURY NEWS

OPEN FOR BUSINESS

Young Ku is reflected in the window of his frame shop on South Abel Street in Milpitas. His shop, Mook Hyaang Art Gallery, offers Asian art, painting and framing. Ku arrived in the United States 15 years ago and opened his shop two years ago. Ku's store is representative of the growing number of Asian-owned businesses in Milpitas that have transformed the city over the past decade.

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Subject: IMMIGRATION (89%); CIVIL WAR (88%); RACE & ETHNICITY (78%); EUROPEAN MIGRANT CRISIS (78%); POLITICAL PARTIES (69%); COLLEGE & UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS (50%)

Company: SOUTHERN PACIFIC RAIL CORP (54%); BAY AREA INSURANCE SERVICES (52%)

Organization: SAN JOSE STATE UNIVERSITY (78%)

Industry: MISC METAL MINING (69%); RAIL STATIONS & TERMINALS (64%); COLLEGE & UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS (50%)

Geographic: SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA, CA, USA (95%); SAN JOSE, CA, USA (90%); HO CHI MINH CITY, VIETNAM (79%); SAN FRANCISCO, CA, USA (79%); SILICON ***VALLEY***, CA, USA (58%); ***CALIFORNIA***, USA (93%); EARTH (73%); UNITED STATES (92%); EL SALVADOR (79%); CHINA (79%); LATIN AMERICA (79%); CENTRAL AMERICA (71%)

Load-Date: December 2, 2001