by Guy Rocha, former Nevada State Archivist

According to United States census data, the largest Chinatown in frontier Nevada was situated on Carson City's southeast side of town. Only for a few years in the mid-1870s when Virginia City's population was at its height did the overall number of its Chinese residents exceed that of Carson City.

As might be expected, the population figures in popular accounts of Carson's Chinatown are inflated and the location of the racial enclave has been often misidentified. While there is no vestige of the once thriving commercial and residential neighborhood, the Carson City Preservation Coalition marked the site of Nevada's premier Chinatown in 2003.

Many writers have placed Chinatown between E. Musser and E. Second, the northern and southern boundaries, and between Fall and Valley streets, the western and eastern boundaries. A recent newspaper story placed Chinatown where the Legislative Mall is today, extending the boundaries as far west as Carson Street and between E. Second and E. Fifth streets. Close but no cigar!

An examination of an 1875 lithograph of Carson City and a Sanborn Fire Insurance map for

1907 clearly places Chinatown between E. Second and E. Fourth streets, on the north and south, and from Fall Street on the west to the east of Valley Street. The main street was E. Third Street and Chinatown sprawled east and west on both sides of the Virginia & Truckee Railroad tracks. The Supreme Court, Legislative Parking Garage, the State Printing and Employment, Training and Rehabilitation buildings, and a parking lot cover most of old Chinatown today.

Having established exactly where Chinatown existed, it is important to determine realistically how large a population lived there at a given time. Figures have been thrown around that range from as low as 800 to as many as 2,000. In 1870, for example when Carson City was just twelve years old, 697 Chinese lived in the State Capital (769 in Ormsby County). With 3,042 people enumerated as living in Carson City, the number of Chinese is impressive, some 23% of the population or almost one out of every four people in town. The ratio of Chinese to non-Chinese in Virginia City never approached the numbers associated with the smaller Carson City.

The 1880 U.S. decennial census identified 802 Chinese in Carson City (pop. 4,229) and 988 Chinese in Ormsby County. Some of the Chinese enumerated lived in the town of Empire, and others were identified as woodcutters in the Carson Range. The peak population for Chinese in Carson City probably occurred in the late 1870s before the nearby Comstock mining district began its long decline. However, Carson City's Chinatown never contained 2,000 souls, despite population undercounts.

By 1890, like most of Nevada, Carson City was in decline. The city's population fell to 3,950, with 670 of the residents being Chinese, some 17% of the total. Ten years later, so many people had exited Carson City that it had become the smallest state capital in the United States with 2,100 citizens. The Chinese population in the county had shrunk to 152.

With new mining booms throughout Nevada, Carson City grew slightly during the first decade of the 20th century, 2,466 residents in 1910, however the Chinese population in Ormsby County fell to 118. Over the next thirty years, a number of fires burned large portions of Chinatown and its residents died off or left the area. By 1920, Carson City only numbered 1,685 citizens (73 Chinese in the county); in 1930, Carson City had declined to the point that with 1,596 residents the capital was as small as it was in the early 1860s (31 Chinese in the county); and in 1940, despite a small growth spurt to 2,478 locals, the Chinese in Ormsby County numbered only 20.

A handful of buildings, including the Chinese Masonic Hall on E. Third Street, were all that was left of Chinatown in the 1940s. By 1950, when Carson City grew to 3,082, only 6 Chinese

resided in the county. The State of Nevada bought what was left of Chinatown and the surrounding area in the 1950s for future capitol complex expansion. When in 1960 Carson City's size had increased to its largest in its one hundred-year history at 5,163, there were 10 Chinese living in the county and none of them lived in what was left of Chinatown.

The State of Nevada razed the last of the Chinatown buildings in the 1960s to make way for new state buildings. Only maps, lithographs, and federal, state, and local government records remind us that Carson City's Chinatown was once the largest in number and percentage of population in Nevada.

The Carson City Historical Commission, which had commemorated a number of historic locations in the mid -1970s with markers, planned to mark the Chinatown site on June 24, 1978. However the effort to place the marker on the legislative grounds was not supported. An historic marker recognizing the contribution of the Chinese to Carson City's history was long overdue.

Photo: Remnants of old Chinatown, in southeast Carson City, ca 1930s.

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