

# U P T O W N CHINATOWN



BUTTE'S  
MAI WAH  
SOCIETY  
IS WORKING  
TO PRESERVE  
MONTANA'S  
CHINESE  
HERITAGE

The crowd of several hundred on the steps of the Butte-Silver Bow Courthouse is bundled in bulky layers; their breath makes icy clouds as they chat. It's February.

They quiet as an official appears and welcomes them. Then a long fabric dragon snakes out and down the stairs, propelled by many suspiciously human legs, and firecrackers explode. Butte's annual Chinese New Year parade takes off to the east. The parade, it turns out, is the crowd, continuously serenaded by 40,000 firecrackers. Winding through a few blocks of the city—the temperature determines how many—it ends up in front of two old brick buildings standing shoulder to shoulder on ▶



BY BETH JUDY

Blizzards are frequent occurrences during Butte's annual Chinese New Year parade.  
| Photo by Walter Hinick/Montana Standard

Mercury Street. White letters at the top of one proclaim “Mai Wah, Noodles & Chop Suey.” Continuing across, black letters on the other building announce “Wah Chong Tai Co.” This is the heart of Butte’s once thriving Chinatown. In a vacant lot across the street, the last 10,000 firecrackers, hung on a rack like bandoleros’ bullet belts, ignite in an orgiastic blaze. Montana’s “shortest, coldest, loudest” parade is officially over.

“We know from old newspapers that there were parades like this in Butte and other Montana Chinatowns,” says Dori Skrukud, a Mai Wah Society board member. The Mai Wah, a nonprofit organization, preserves and interprets Butte’s Asian heritage and owns the two buildings. “Traditionally, firecrackers drive away evil spirits. The dragon blesses businesses and brings goodwill.”

The city of Taipei gave the Mai Wah its current colorful, sparkly parade dragon. Skrukud remembers their first, homemade one when the parade started about 15 years ago. “It was made from cans wrapped in plastic, so it rattled. The head looked more like a beagle.”

Asians, mostly men, began arriving in Montana in the 1860s to participate in placer and hydraulic mining. Sizable Chinese communities grew up in Butte and near Rocker and German Gulch. However, prevented by a federal Chinese exclusion act from owning land, staking claims, or indirectly, from working underground, the Chinese (a group that included some Japanese, Koreans, and Polynesians) migrated into service industries. Starting a laundry, tailor shop, or garden took neither capital nor owned property. In 1890, Butte had 4 Chinese laundries. In 1895, it had 18; in 1900, 31.

Recognizing a significant Asian customer base, the Wah Chong Company, a Chinese import firm in Seattle, built the Wah Chong Tai (“Beautiful Old China”) building in 1899. It was a mercantile with a noodle parlor on the third floor. Customers entered from “China Alley” alongside the building. By the time the Mai Wah (“Beautiful and Luxurious”) building was added in 1909, Butte’s non-Asians had discovered hot, fast, cheap noodle dishes. The parlor spanned both buildings’ third floors. The new building more boldly fronted Mercury Street.

Approximately 2,500 Asians lived and worked throughout Butte during the community’s heyday, but Chinatown was its center, the Wah Chong Tai its heart. “The mercantile provided goods,” Skrukud says, “but also had a letter-writing service and an herbalist and

served as a bank. New arrivals went there for help finding jobs or a place to live.”

Several Chinese became respected community members, like Huie [HOY] Pock, a physician who saw Asians and non-Asians alike. Women and families were few—the Exclusion Act outlawed marriage—but what Chinese kids there were attended Butte public schools as well as a Chinese school organized by their parents.

Fast forward to the 1980s. Hal Waldrup remembers the cacophony up in the noodle parlor, but it was no longer conversation, clinking tableware, sizzling and steam. Instead, raindrops drummed into countless

buckets through leaks in the roof. Through a series of coincidences, Waldrup had become the building’s caretaker. The Chinn family, the last Chinese owners, closed the restaurant in the 1940s. The Asian community had been dwindling since the 1920s. Because of the Exclusion Act, which lasted until World War II, “they couldn’t get women,” says Ellen Crain of the Butte Archives, “plus the economy wasn’t so great, so they left.” Discrimination, misunderstanding, and even violence were constant. “They were second-class citizens,” says Skrukud. “It was hard, different to be Asian in this town. They went to larger Chinese communities.”

By the time archivist Crain was growing up, the buildings had become a fix-it and junk shop run by a man named Paul Eno. Eno was eccentric, says Waldrup, who took care of him in his old age. “He had a junk shop, but he never wanted to sell anything.” That turned out to be fortunate. Eno had been friends with the Chinn; his junk included many Chinese artifacts. “It was like a time capsule,” Waldrup recalls with wonder. “There were letters, waiters’ suits from the top floor, trunks full of books and clothes, a giant noodle-cutting machine, a granite stone for grinding rice. Treasures were double-locked in the kitchen. The Chinn’s experienced so much ▶



Kanyen Stephens, 2, tries to share his cookie with the Mai Wah Society’s dragon. | Photo by Walter Hinick/ Montana Standard

‘This group of people shared life with a multitude of other ethnic groups. It was an amazing mix. The community’s not here anymore, but we want to preserve this part of our ethnic heritage. We don’t want to lose this piece of the ethnic pie that made up Butte, Montana.’



Dori Skrukud, Mai Wah Society board member



This page: The Mai Wah Society, top. A piece of pottery from found during a 2007 excavation, below. Facing page: A Butte Chinese family portrait, top, Chinese miners, left, and a baby photo, right.



Photos by Walter Hinick/The Montana Standard.

prejudice, they just abandoned the past, left it behind.” When Eno died in 1986, his family abandoned the building. Waldrup knew the city would tear it down if he didn’t take care of it. For five years he paid the taxes or talked others into it. He sifted through junk, saving artifacts. “I wore out 75 volunteers, but I’d worked at the Anaconda Smelter and the Butte Concentrator. I wasn’t afraid of dirt.” He promoted the buildings to anyone who would listen. “I’d see someone peering in the windows, I’d give them a tour.”

Finally, Waldrup, Jana Faught, who owned the Silver Dollar Bar across the alley from the Mai Wah, and others started the Mai Wah Society. Dori Skrukud came to a fundraiser at the Silver Dollar. “I volunteered to wash windows. From there, it’s never stopped.”

The Mai Wah building hosts a permanent exhibit about the Chinese in Butte. On a budget now up to \$25,000, the Society repairs and improves the building, most recently adding heat and a bathroom. The organization reaches out to area schools, Asian exchange students and Chinese trade partners and dignitaries. It’s been selected to host traveling exhibits from top-class museums. In 2007, it spearheaded an archaeological dig across the street where residential buildings once stood. There’s talk of restocking the mercantile with artifacts that landed in Nevada and Virginia cities, Helena and the Butte Archives.

Most important to Mai Wah members, the Society is there when former residents and descendants return. “They’re astonished to see the buildings still here,” Skrukud says. “A wonderful woman in her 80s came with her son. She’d grown up across the street. She just cried. Another woman was born on Utah Street. She walked up China Alley, pointing to vacant lots, saying, ‘This was a laundry. That was an herb shop. That’s where my Chinese teacher lived.’”

“It’s bittersweet. We understand that. We don’t want to whitewash the Chinese experience,” Skrukud says. Jana Faught muses, “How different this city might have been if that part of town had grown and prospered.” The New Year’s parade honors and celebrates the community that once was. Says Skrukud, “This group of people shared life with a multitude of other ethnic groups. It was an amazing mix. The community’s not here anymore, but we want to preserve this part of our ethnic heritage. We don’t want to lose this piece of the ethnic pie that made up Butte, Montana.”

So families gather from across town, from across the state and now the country and the world. They insert earplugs and drift down the street, sometimes through a blizzard. A Chinese-American visitor from California surprised Skrukud. “She told me snow is a very, very good omen.”

Beth Judy is a frequent contributor to *Montana Magazine*. She lives in Missoula.



Photos courtesy of the Mai Wah Society



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