

The Chinese in Marion County and Salem

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If one looks at the 1870 Census, he or she will find a list of nearly a dozen young Chinese men employed in the Salem area as cooks working for well-to-do families. By 1877, the Salem Chinese had families of their own, and a mission school run by First Baptist Church of Salem enrolled up to forty Chinese children.¹

Some time around this date, the Salem Chinese, like their countrymen in many other U.S. cities, formed their own Chinatown. This early Chinatown was "a half block of old, ramshackle building[s], on the east side of Liberty Street between Court and State."² By 1903, the original Salem Chinatown had been condemned, and its residents moved to a 4-6 block area that was located in the two blocks directly south of old Chinatown, and the three blocks between Trade and Court streets on the west side of Liberty.³ That area today includes the Reed Opera House, the Salem Conference Center, the Salem Grand Ballroom, and IHOP. Salem's Chinatown was home to a number of laundries, in addition to restaurants and hardware stores.⁴ But the five-block area was cramped, rent was "excessive", and landlords were "reluctant to raze sagging, out-moded false fronts."⁵ Furthermore, the explorations of a local writer uncovered such unappealing features as standing laundry fluid and ground covered with blood from butchered animals.⁶ However, despite the difficulties these problems may have caused for those who lived and did business in Chinatown, they were short-lived. Whereas Salem at one time had a Chinese population of over two-hundred who considered Chinatown their cultural center, by 1925, the Chinese population in Salem consisted of around thirty people, and "Salem's Chinatown was mostly just a memory of a bygone era."⁷

Bibliography

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Silva Spring, Katie. "Chinese influence in Salem." *Statesman Journal*, Local section. 5/29/94.

Endnotes

¹ Notes from Toni Salzman in Marion County Historical Society "Ethnic: Chinese" file.

² Ben Maxwell, "The Chinese in Salem," *Marion County History*, Vol. 1, pg. 15.

³ Katie Silva Spring, "Chinese influence on display in Salem," *Statesman Journal*, 5/29/94, Local section.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Maxwell, 10-11.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.