

Sun Wing Wo general store and herb shop: Background Information

Grades 1-3



Garnier Building, 1942

Ow Bue Lew opened the Sun Wing Wo store in 1891. The store was located in the historic Garnier Building at 419-421 Los Angeles Street in El Pueblo de Los Angeles. The Garnier Building was one of the first buildings to rent space to Chinese and it became the home of the Sun Wing Wo store. The store was a very important part of original Chinatown and served the community in many ways. In 1933, original Chinatown was removed to build what is now the Union Station Passenger Terminal. The Garnier Building is the only building that was not torn down and Sun Wing Wo stayed there until it moved to New Chinatown in 1948.

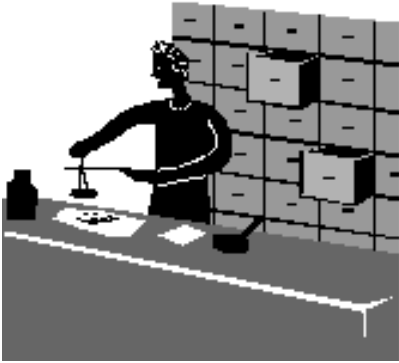
When the Chinese came to the United States, they did not speak English and were used to a very different culture in China. Because of this, they faced a difficult acculturation process. Luckily, the Sun Wing Wo store was able to help the Chinese through this. They could go there to find things from their traditional and familiar culture such as food, language, dress, customs, and the company of other Chinese. The store also had different and new things from American culture that they could choose, or sometimes had to add into their lives. Many Chinese chose to keep pieces of their traditional culture to help them get used to living in a new place, or simply because they wanted to.



Interior of the Sun Wing Wo store, 1902

Inside Sun Wing Wo, there were shelves of canned and dried goods, and displays of affordable clothing. It sold mostly Chinese products, but also some American products like cigars and perfumed soaps. The store had a diverse group of customers. It mostly served the Chinese American community, but European, Japanese, and Mexican Americans also came to buy the Chinese products sold there. Customers would stock up for the week on tea, rice, wine, oils, sauces for cooking, and other Chinese supplies. Sun Wing Wo had products that Chinese used in their daily lives and could not find at other stores.

Sun Wing Wo general store and herb shop: Background Information (continued)



One of the many traditional Chinese practices that the Sun Wing Wo store continued here in the United States was Chinese Medicine. It was given new life in America. People of many ethnicities used Chinese Medicine and its herbal treatments because it often worked when Western cures did not. Unfortunately, because of anti-Chinese discrimination, many doctors of Chinese Medicine were not allowed to do business. Acupuncture was not even legalized until 1976! Because of this discrimination, many Chinese doctors advertised themselves with Western facial features and names.

Many Chinese who came to America were illiterate, meaning they did not know how to read or write. Because of this, Sun Wing Wo provided a letter writing service. At the store, Chinese could dictate (say what they want written) a letter to someone who would write their letter for them. Sun Wing Wo also served as a bank and post office, so people could also go there to send money with their letters to help support their families in China.



The Sun Wing Wo store also served as a safe space for the Chinese community. It was a place where Chinese were accepted, and could feel welcome and safe. This was rare at the time because of anti-Chinese racism and discrimination. People shared the experiences of being Chinese newcomers in the United States and could support each other and had things in common because of this. The familiar languages, foods, customs, and culture at the store, also provided them with a comfortable environment. As well as going there to shop, bank, and write letters, Chinese visited the store to relax after a hard day's work and to enjoy each other's company.

The Sun Wing Wo store was one of the first residents of the Garnier building, and one of the last Chinese American businesses to leave original Chinatown. The store shows how the Chinese American community was able to take care of itself, how strong it was, and how it continues to grow and change.