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Abstracts presented during the Book and Paper Group Session

The Chew Kee Store: Preserving the Legacy of the California Cantonese Gold Rush

Jennifer Parson and Kala Conservation

The Chew Kee Store in Fiddletown, California, established during the Gold Rush, was an herbal medicine shop and general store that serviced the Chinese immigrant community and remains a unique material archive of the legacy of Chinese American history. With a main storefront at the entrance and living quarters in the back, it served as a business and home for its residents and gives the visitor a rare glimpse into the lives of early Chinese immigrants to California. It operated as a store until 1913 and was the center of the once vibrant community, the largest Chinese community in California outside San Francisco. The store was occupied continuously until the last Chinese resident in Fiddletown, Jimmy Chow,

died in 1965. He kept the store and its contents intact and the building stands today as a time capsule of Cantonese Gold Rush immigrant culture. Over the past 40 years, there has been an ongoing community-initiated effort to preserve the Chew Kee Store building and its contents, now a museum and California historic site. The building is a traditional rammed-earth construction; its thick adobe walls are covered in layers of peeling 19th century newspapers. The rooms are filled with original items from the store and other objects of daily life. The walls and shelves reflect the material culture of a 19th-century Chinese merchant: colorful banners with calligraphy, religious ephemera, calendars, decorative tea boxes, medicine bottles, and account books. Most of these paper-based materials were in a severely deteriorated state. This talk will outline the historic significance of the Chew Kee store, past interventions to restore the building and its contents, and lastly my recent conservation treatment of the varied paper-based materials.