The Book and Paper Group Annual is published once each year by the Book and Paper Group (BPG), a specialty group of the American Institute for Conservation (AIC). It was published in print from 1982 to 2021, and transitioned to a digital publication in 2022. All issues are available online at https://culturalheritage.org. Print copies of back issues are available from AIC. All correspondence concerning back issues should be addressed to:

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The Book and Paper Group Annual is a non-juried publication. Papers presented at the Book and Paper Session of the annual meeting of the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works are selected by committee based on abstracts. After presentation authors have the opportunity to revise their papers before submitting them for publication in the Annual; there is no further selection review of these papers. Independent submissions are published at the discretion of the BPG Publications Committee. Authors are responsible for the content and accuracy of their submissions and for the methods and/or materials they present. Publication in the Annual does not constitute official statements or endorsement by the BPG or by AIC.
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.