

Central Coast: Past, Present, Future

The remarkable life of Ah Louis



By Mark James Miller

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He was a Renaissance man if ever there was one. Builder, entrepreneur, labor contractor, community leader.

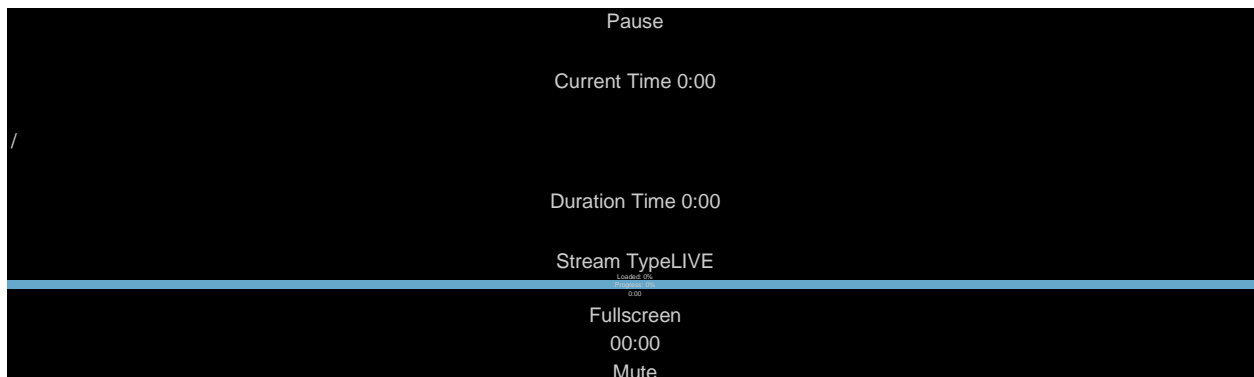
He made bricks that went into many of the historic buildings of San Luis Obispo. He helped ease tensions between whites and Chinese at a time when prejudice against Asians was at its ugliest. He opened the first “Chinese Store” in the United States, a store that became the focal point of one of the most vibrant Chinese communities in California.

He built roads that connected parts of San Luis Obispo County to one another, some of which are still in use. He started the vegetable and flower seed business on the Central Coast. He lent money at generous terms but never used a ledger book, carrying all the figures in his head.

If you have ever driven along Palm Street in San Luis Obispo you have probably seen the place from which this amazing man ran his many businesses and raised his family. The Ah Louis Store was originally built of wood in 1874, then rebuilt of brick from Ah Louis’ own brickyard in 1885.

The store is all that remains of a collection of buildings that graced this part of Palm Street during the heyday of the San Luis Obispo Chinatown in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They included a boarding house, gambling hall and a “joss house” where the Chinese went to worship. Ah Louis was its unofficial mayor.

Ah Louis was born Wong On in Guangdong Province in southern China in 1840. But Guangdong, wracked by war, famine and banditry, offered little opportunities for an ambitious young man. Seeking a better life, Wong set out for what the Chinese called “The Gold Mountain” — California — in 1861, where he worked first as a miner, then as a cook and then as a laborer, where his genius burst into full flower.



Realizing that more workers were needed to do the excruciating physical labor of building railroads, roads and tunnels on the Central Coast, Ah Louis became a labor contractor, bringing in Chinese to wield the picks and shovels. An 1875 newspaper advertisement says “Ah Luis. Labor Agent. Chinese labor contracted on short notice.”

Seeing that bricks were going to be needed as the Central Coast grew, he opened the area’s first brickyard in 1885. Ah Louis’ brick not only went into his store, but can be found today in the Railroad Square Building on Santa Barbara Street and in the Johnson Building. In 1884 Louis landed the contract to build the four Cuesta Grade tunnels for the Southern Pacific Railroad’s

coastal route, a project that needed 2,000 laborers and took 10 years to complete.

Meanwhile his store's business was humming. On its shelves were items the Chinese missed from home — sea cucumbers, tea, dried abalone and medicinal herbs. From here the local Chinese celebrated their New Year with fireworks. From here Ah Louis also raised the flag of the new Chinese Republic of Sun Yat-Sen in 1911.

Ah Louis knew great joy in his life, but he also knew sorrow. In 1889 he met the beautiful Gon Ying, who became his second wife. The marriage was a happy one and Gon Ying bore him eight children. Sadly, she was murdered in 1909 by Willie Wong, Ah Louis' son from his previous marriage.

“There is nothing impossible to him that will try,” said Alexander the Great, and no one ever proved the truth of this better than Ah Louis, whose life shows what amazing things one person can do if they are willing to try.

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