

New Chinese History Museum

Founder Brian Tom discusses his tribute, in Marysville, Calif., to Chinese Americans of the Gold Rush-era.

By [Joanna Corman](#) | [March/April 2008](#)



For 40 years, Brian Tom collected artifacts for a museum he dreamed of building. Then, three years ago, the retired attorney bought a former hotel in Marysville, Calif., where his grandfather had settled 150 years earlier after leaving China to mine for gold in the Sierra. In 2007, in California's last active gold country Chinatown, Tom opened the Chinese American Museum of Northern California. Admission is free. 232 First St., (530) 743-8160. On March 8 and 9, Marysville hosts its annual Bok Kai Festival www.bokkaifestival.com.

Q *Why build a museum?*

A To tell the story of the Chinese in America. Much has been written from the standpoint of economics. I think the history is much richer and more complex.

Q *Why in Marysville?*

A It used to have the nation's second-largest Chinatown. My family has been there since 1851.

Q *What became of the town's Chinese citizens?*

A The federal Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which legalized racial discrimination, impacted the population severely. Many young people moved away.

Q *The real treasures in the museum?*

A I have a couple of Chinese picks used to mine gold in the 1850s. Also 200 old photos, many never exhibited. The back of the building is a restored bean-sprout plant once run by a family that supplied Chinese restaurants in the Marysville–Yuba City area until the 1950s.

Q *What is the Bok Kai Festival?*

A It's been taking place probably since the 1850s. There's a parade—California's oldest—with lion dancers and dragons, floats, martial arts shows, and a museum tour. Lectures, too.

Photography by Anita Bowen

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