I understand Pittsburgh once had a thriving Chinatown. Is that true?
— Joseph Forbes, Oakland

Maybe you’ve seen Downtown’s garishly painted Chinatown Inn from the Boulevard of the Allies, and wondered: Who are they trying to fool? But in fact, the structure is a landmark, built in 1922 as the local headquarters of a powerful Chinese fraternal society known as the On Leong.

The first Chinese in the region were brought in 1872 as strike-breakers by a cutlery manufacturer which was owned, oddly enough, by a utopian religious order called the Harmony Society. The tactic proved distinctly unharmonious; resentment of the Chinese spread quickly, and newspapers railed against imported “Coolie labor.” But Chinese continued to filter into the region, and by 1900 had created a compact Chinatown in Downtown along Grant Street. At its heyday in the 1900s and 1910s, the district stretched along Second and Third avenues between Grant and Ross streets. It included two dozen businesses: laundries and restaurants, but also pharmacies and other stores carrying products the Chinese could not find anywhere else. The district had its own unelected “mayor” and a complex network of family societies and associations like On Leong and its rival, the Hip Sing Association, which offered protection in a foreign land.

They needed the protection. At best, whites smilingly patronized the Chinese with racist stereotypes. In an otherwise friendly 1935 account, for example, the Bulletin Index magazine observed that the Chinese were recognizable “if not by slant-eyes, at least by their hats which, because of a general nonconformity of Oriental craniums to American headgear, are inevitably either under-sized or over-sized.” Racism was often more overt. In 1903, the Pittsburgh Press reported that Pittsburgh offered “special inducements for the Italian, the Hungarian and others, who are willing to handle the shovel in the construction of railroads, or the pick in mining coal; but no such methods of earning a sustenance [sic] appeals to the Chinaman.” The observation would be laughable if it weren’t so repugnant: thousands of Chinese immigrants had been doing — and dying at — those very jobs across the country for decades.

Societies like On Leong and Hip Sing — known as “tongs” — were especially controversial. While mostly benevolent, they feuded openly with each other for control of Chinatowns across the country. The Pittsburgh Dispatch likened them to a “tide of Oriental rottenness” led by men “to whom human life is less valuable than that of a chicken.” There were numerous murders in Pittsburgh between the two factions.

But the tong wars, as they were called, ended in 1931, and even critics acknowledged that most Chinese were sturdy citizens. In the 1930s, headlines observed that while the Chinese were hurt by the Depression, “Not One Has Asked Relief of Welfare Agencies; All Are Cared for by Members of Their Own Race.” Another reporter approvingly quoted a Chinese merchant’s assertion that “I have my fireworks to sell and if I sell them, maybe my children will go to Pitt or Carnegie Tech or Duquesne.”

By 1930, in fact, the Post-Gazette was lamenting, “Old Chinatown is rapidly vanishing and with it the Oriental glamour.... A walk through the changing district is disillusioning with signs of swift Americanization.” Chinatown had once been damned as a
den of Oriental strangeness; now it was decried for becoming too familiar.

Even before ethnic differences were being smoothed over, Chinatown itself was being paved under. According to a 1983 thesis, The Chinese in Pittsburgh by Chien-shiung Wu (an invaluable resource for this article available at the University of Pittsburgh's Hillman Library), the construction of the Boulevard of the Allies in 1921 cut through the district's heart at Second Avenue and Grant Street, "tearing half of Chinatown into pieces." Ironically, one of Pittsburgh's most unique ethnic enclaves was devastated by a road commemorating an end to nationalist violence in the First World War. Events on the national scene contributed to Chinatown's decline as well; for example, a series of anti-Chinese immigration laws passed in 1882 — heavily supported by an American Federation of Labor national convention that met in Pittsburgh the previous year — halted Chinese immigration for 60 years.

By 1960, Chinatown was home to only three Chinese families. And with the exception of the On Leong headquarters, its buildings have been torn down, replaced with law offices. 

CORRECTIONS TO SUMMER 2001

p. 4 The website of model builder City Classics is http://cityclassics.fwc-host.com

p. 5 "Whitehall" was not part of Isaac Manchester's Plantation Plenty, but rather a well-known 1792 house in Middletown, R.I., that may have inspired Manchester. It was that house, likewise in a valley, that was admired by its owner from a ridge.

p. 51 The lender of numerous Beatles artifacts was Bob Gottuso.

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