

**A CHINESE
WESTERN**

**NOT A CHINAMANS
CHANCE IN CHICO**

**A TRUE TALE OF
THE OLD WEST**

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To her: she is so very beautiful but refuses to admit or recognize this fact, a common affliction with very beautiful women.

To Ray Murdock, my former teacher, fellow Chico history lover and antiqueaholic. You have never tread on others and are always a friend to those in need.

To Ron Roller (Pinky Jackson), always a friend to those in need.

CHAPTER ONE

I AM NO CAESAR

I am no Caesar. Ah Quen laid in the back of a wagon with a blanket over him. He stared at the early morning blue sky over Chico, California, the same sky that extended over his home in China. He knew that at his home in China it was 15 hours ahead of Chico. When he and his friends would talk they would often estimate what time it was at their homes in China and what their families would be doing at that time. They were always homesick for their families and village. When a man asked what time it was Ah Quen heard someone say that it was just before 11 am. He thought through his broken mind that it must be almost 2 am in China and the beautiful night stars would be out over his village.

Many men were busy looking around the cabin nearby, looking down at Ah Quen and talking around the wagon. His thoughts were fractured; fractured thoughts, in a fractured skull, with a fractured brain. Ah Quen, even with two bullet holes in his skull, was lucid enough to be aware that he was dying. He had been shot twice in the brain nine hours before. He was shot on 14 March, 1877 just 3 hours before the Ides of March and he had survived with his mortal wounds for 9 hours. Now all that Ah Quen could think with his fractured thoughts was, why? Why was he assassinated, he was no Caesar. Why was he to die on the Ides of March?

He had heard woodcutter Douglas speak of the warning to beware the ides of March. Douglas said that Roman Emperor Caesar had been assassinated on the ides of March. Now Ah Quen wondered why he was to suffer the fate of Julius Caesar, 1920 years after Caesar's death. Ah Quen had none of the guilt of power that Caesar held which had lead to Caesar's death. He was only a simple laborer who bothered no one. Ah Quen could not understand his similar fate to Julius Caesar; he was just a simple man, a Chinese laborer, a woodcutter.

People milling about the cabin where Ah Quen lived and died would walk up to him and look down at him laying in the wagon with a bloody bandage wrapped around his head. Some looked with the morbid curiosity that all humans share about death, wondering how their own end will come and when. Some looked upon him with a sympathetic eye of the compassionate human being, sympathy for his torment in life and premature violent demise.

Ah Quen, who had existed immobile but conscious of his surroundings for 9 long hours of immobile thinking after he was shot, finally fell away from life on this, the Ides of March 1877. Ah Quen's eyes stopped seeing and became fixed and dilated with a distant stare up into the light blue sky and the cosmos beyond. His life was never more.

The sad ending of his life was the result of a brutal assassination against an innocent who merely

came to the Golden Mountain of America to make a better life for himself and return home to his native land with wealth enough to own a good farm. Now Ah Quen's body would never rest in the soil of his native China. He was doomed to lie in an unmarked grave in the Chinese section of the Chico Cemetery. He drifted into a shadow of the past, a footnote in human existence as another day dawned bright in the next morning. Following Ah Quen's death, humanity continued with its earthly toil as others were born and died. His brief window of existence ended on the Ides of March and Ah Quen became but a specter of what he once was. His last thought was, but why must I die so young, I am no Caesar, I am no emperor, I am just a simple man who does not create enemies, who would hate me so? I am no Caesar.

CHAPTER TWO

GOOD ORDERLY MEN

The six Chinamen worked tirelessly as though on a holy mission with an intense focus. There was little time for day dreaming while they cut down the large oaks and sycamore trees. When they first saw the Sacramento Valley, while working for the San Francisco Chinese Nin Yung Company, they were in awe of all the trees that covered the entire valley. Trees that had to be removed to expose the valuable top soil that had been in the making for thousands of years in this flood plain wetland valley fed by the Sacramento, Feather and Yuba rivers. The soil of the valley was a deep compost of seasonal floods from the creeks and rivers, grasses and plants and leaves flooding and rotting to form a soil that created the best vegetables, grains, nuts and fruits. After the expense of removing the trees was done, a farmer almost could not fail as the soil seemed to plant and tend itself in the Sacramento Valley.

Now the Six Chinamen Ah Lin, Ah Lee, Ah Gow, Ah In, Ah Quen and Ah Shung, were clearing the land of a German Immigrant farmer, Christian Lemm. Lemm had a wonderful farm a few miles to the East of Chico Township, bordering on Chico Creek, sometimes called Big Chico Creek due to a smaller creek running parallel just two miles south of it, a farm that was destined for success once all the land was cleared. Lemm had contracted with the Chinese labor company, Nin Yung, out of San Francisco, to clear a section of his land. The Nin Yung Company had sent six of their men to do the work and now they were close to completion of the labor contract. Lemm had been happy with their work and they had caused no problems in the community. A short time later Lemm would call the six Chinese woodcutters: “good orderly men.”

Ah Lin, Ah Lee, Ah Gow, Ah In, Ah Quen and Ah Shung would work like possessed fiends all during the day and rest at night to prepare themselves for the continuation of their labors the next day. They knew their goal was in sight and when they finished they would be paid and could send money home to China. Their home was 5836 miles away from Chico Township, California but it was never far from their thoughts. In fact it was always on their minds, they were always homesick for their country and families.

They had come to America and California, which they called the Golden Mountain, to seek their fortunes. This fortune that was low labor wages in the United States, would buy a good farm or business in China if they saved enough and didn't squander their money. They dreamed of returning to their homeland as prosperous victors in the war for economic success that is so much a part of our complicated existence as humans, that quest for wealth.

After you returned home to China from the Golden Mountain you were somebody. Somebody people listened to, you had your stories of living in a foreign land with riches and opportunities. You were somebody important in the village or city that you returned to because you had taken the risk of travelling long distances, labored hard and smart and returned with wealth for investment in a better life for you and your family. It was a wonderful dream and it gave life and labor purpose and meaning.

The year was 1877 and it was the month of March. The weather in northern California was mild, not like the harsh winters and cold springtime of homeland China. Ah Lin, Ah Lee, Ah Gow, Ah In, Ah Quen and Ah Shung were enjoying the warming spring that was coming upon them. Some days were downright hot in March. Ah Lin loved dreaming of his triumphant return to his town in China but he had a constant feeling of woe and foreboding that continued to haunt him, maybe it was the anti-Chinese burnings at the Patrick ranch and China house in Nord.

When March had arrived, Ah Lin was with Christian Lemm and another white man, named Douglas, also a woodcutter for Lemm. When Douglas and Lemm were speaking about the coming of March, Douglas said to Lemm, "remember the Ides of March Christian, the Ides of March will be upon us soon." Ah Lin didn't know what the Ides of March meant but Douglas's comment only added to Ah Lin's foreboding as the Ides of March Douglas spoke of didn't sound good. It was a strange premonition made by Douglas that would haunt Ah Lin forever after.

For the six Chinese woodcutters, Ah Lin, Ah Lee, Ah Gow, Ah In, Ah Quen and Ah Shung, they would all suffer the Ides of March, three hours early.

CHAPTER THREE

BAD OMENS

John Bidwell felt hollow and numb this New Years Day 1877. He missed his wife Annie who was back in Washington D.C. visiting her family. He dreaded the telegram he was constructing in his mind of what to say to her. It was not an unexpected event, just a very sorrowful one.

John Bidwell could not have known just how horrible a year that 1877 would be but he had a very uneasy feeling that it might be the worst year of his 57 years of life. The topic, commonly called the “Chinese Question” would place Bidwell’s town, Chico, California in a vulgar spotlight throughout the nation and even in the foreign presses, including those in China.

Bidwell was an easterner by birth and by grooming. The east was civilized and the men from it were respectable and of good moral character. Bidwell was now a westerner, a Californian. He loved his adopted state of California, it had made him wealthy and successful beyond what any normal man of these times could expect or hope to achieve.

Around 1839 Bidwell was only 20 years old but he had already had a very full life having become the principal of Kingsville academy and then a land owner beginning a new farm in Missouri. Bidwell had lost his Missouri land claim to claim jumpers when one of those strange circumstances presented itself and Bidwell’s life was changed for the better for the remainder of his years. A chance encounter and odd circumstance lead to Bidwell’s amazing success.

After losing his land claim and while wondering what to do next, he met and befriended a French trapper named Robidoux. Robidoux was one of those remarkable men who explored and opened the frontier of the new America. Lean and muscular with a long dark beard and hair, he looked a thousand years old and a thousand years wise though he was not yet 30. Dressed in buckskin leather and never without his rifle each day for him was a search for pelts that would make him money to use at the trading post store. The pelts he obtained also provided another benefit, a rich diet of various kinds of meats. For Robidoux the wilderness was his grocery store, always open and always full of something to eat no matter the time of year.

After hearing Bidwell’s tale of being cheated out of his farmland Robidoux told him about amazing large acreages of river bottom land in the north of the place the Spanish called California. Robidoux had hunted and trapped in California years before and told Bidwell of its rich soil and abundant water.

Bidwell knew little of California but asked Ribidoux that, wasn’t California in the Country of Mexico? Ribidoux told him that indeed it was in Mexico but that the Mexican government welcomes settlers from the United States as they were building a great Country with the riches of

the land. Robidoux told Bidwell of valleys in California that were full of ancient oak trees and rivers and streams. The wetlands were so ancient that the soil was made of black rich earth from the thousands of years that leaves and grasses had rotted back into the ground each year. It was soil so rich it would grow anything, Robidoux exclaimed. He told Bidwell that the north part of California had a great river flowing through the middle of a huge valley 100 miles across. The Spanish had named the river the Sacramento and it flowed from the far north of this valley to the Delta at the bay of a place called Mission San Francisco. He told Bidwell that Missouri land was no comparison to California land. He consoled Bidwell by telling him: "those boys who jumped your claim here in Missouri did you a favor if you stake some California land instead". Even if you don't get rich, you will never go hungry in California, even a blind man can grow enough food in California to get fat, Robidoux added.

Robidoux lit a fire under Bidwell about California and he never looked back to the Missouri farm or the land claim jumpers. As Robidoux told Bidwell he became better off for it.

Robidoux's parting words to Bidwell, John Bidwell would forever live by and never forget. When they parted company for the last time, as they were riding their horses in opposite directions, Robidoux turned in his saddle and yelled out to Bidwell: "now remember John, there are only two things in life that make a successful man". Robidoux then hesitated. Bidwell took the gesture and said and what is that? Then Ribidoux replied: John success in life is controlled by only two factors, Luck and Timing! Bidwell smiled and waved good bye while thanking Robidoux for the sound and wise advice. Bidwell then yelled back, Mr. Robidoux, look me up in California if you get back there again. Robidoux nodded his head and smiled and rode off into the direction his life was going while Bidwell rode off into the direction his life would take him.

By May of 1841 Bidwell was in Sapling Groove, which was then Kansas territory, joining a wagon train to California, Bidwell was not yet 22 years old. Six months later the 69 members of the Bidwell-Bartleson party arrived in California, tired, hungry but intact. From then on Bidwell's life would be a whirlwind of interesting things and frequent success. What John Bidwell learned from his move west was that the west was never dull or fraught with the any amount of boredom.

Bidwell's first job was working for early California pioneer and Swiss Immigrant John Sutter at Sutter's fort in Sacramento. Bidwell's employment with Sutter was fulfilling and enlightening. He traveled the entire Sacramento valley from the delta that pours into the bay of Mission San Francisco to the far north of the valley at the headwaters of the Sacramento River and from the Pacific Ocean coast to the Sierra Nevada Mountains. He surveyed land grants and conducted a census for Sutter. His time with Sutter gave him an intimate knowledge of the entire valley and its best land.

To acquire land for American immigrants in California they had to obtain Mexican citizenship

which required letters of recommendation delivered to the California Mexican government in Monterey. In 1844, Sutter took Bidwell to Monterey and Bidwell was granted both Mexican citizenship and a land grant for a ranch called Ulipinos in what later became Solano county.

June of 1846 saw Bidwell join the Bear Flag Revolt against the Mexican government and the declaration that California as a sovereign nation. The Bear Flag Revolt and the independent nation of California was short lived only lasting a month, since the United States Army was already coming into California, having gone to war with Mexico on 25 April 1846.

In 1846, the Mexican war with the United States lasting until 1848 saw Bidwell with his original countrymen, the Americans. Bidwell served as a Major under General John Charles Fremont during this war against his former adopted country, Mexico.

After Bidwell's military service ended in 1848, the event that would define California and make Bidwell a wealthy man took place at Sutter's mill in Coloma, California. Bidwell was again working for Sutter when gold was discovered at the mill, not just gold but lots of it for the easy taking. James Wilson Marshall ran the saw mill for John Sutter. Bidwell took the information of Marshall's gold discovery at Sutter's mill, directly to San Francisco, thus helping to start the great 49er gold rush to California. Bidwell, a highly intelligent and educated man knew that the gold discovery would mean more than gold wealth for California, it would bring hungry people who would need food to live. Food energy was what people would need to look for the yellow elusive as they called the beautiful ancient metal forged in the cosmos by the violent collision of two neutron stars.

Bidwell knew that this fortunate timing was working to his benefit and he worked quickly. He sold his Ulpinos ranch to a man named Colonel Semple. Since Bidwell knew the river complexes of California from his employment with John Sutter he rode into the Feather River complex north west of Sacramento in the Sierra Nevada Mountains and hit pay dirt. Not just pay dirt but a wealth of gold. Bidwell would use this wealth to later hit actual pay dirt, rich soil for growing food, Bidwell's first passion, farming.

The rivers of the Feather River complex cut miles and miles through the Sierra Nevada Mountains. The river received its name from Spanish Conquistadors in the mid 1500s when they explored the Feather River in the Sacramento valley and the river, so rich in abundant waterfowl was covered in Feathers. The Feather River acts like an axe cutting deep canyons into the Sierra Nevada mountain range. The Sierra Nevada's are themselves covered with ancient river channels millions of years old that run perpendicular to the current feather river. The many thousands of years of the feather river cutting and slicing through these ancient channels has created a pot of gold at the bottom of the rivers where the water slows down and the gold has a chance to rest just waiting for the lucky man to find it. In this instance that lucky man was John Bidwell.

Good luck and good timing is what John Bidwell had when he staked his claim on the Feather

River on what was to become the mining operation and gold boom town of Bidwell's Bar, complete with a toll bridge, owned by Bidwell. The Bridge still exists today near the town of Oroville.

Bidwell's bar not being a place of liquor and drunken miners but an ancient gravel bar, thousands of years old. A bar is a slow place in the river where the water slows down and the gold bearing gravels accumulate. The bar is the size of a small island and thick with gravel going down ten and forty feet deep. There is fine gold on the top and the middle of the bar but the riches are on the bottom lying, waiting for the lucky man to pick it from the hard cement like bedrock at the bottom of the bar.

By 1849, Bidwell had accumulated enough gold to purchase a vast tract of fertile land. Bidwell, a farmer at heart, knew that the California gold rush was increasing the population of this new American territory. Bidwell knew that more people meant the need for more food. Gold was not the most valuable thing on earth, that honor went to food and abundant water, Bidwell wanted to acquire both.

Bidwell's work for John Sutter had showed him all the best land in the Sacramento Valley and he knew that the very best land and water he had ever seen was at a place 100 miles north of Sutter's fort called Rancho Del Arroyo Chico. Rancho Del Arroyo Chico, an original Spanish Land Grant, consisted of 23,000 acres of the best land and water in the Sacramento valley. The Rancho sat between the Sacramento River on the west and the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains to the east. It had numerous creeks running through the rich soil. Butte creek was the largest creek on the property being in the southern portion of the Rancho. Little Chico and Big Chico creeks were plentiful in the summertime and divided by only a mile or so and they kept the small town of Chico cool in the scorching hot summers.

The entire Rancho was covered in ancient Oak trees, some more than 200 years old. Other native trees and grasses were also plentiful. Because of the thousands of years of flooding from the creeks and the leaves and grasses composting into soil, the land was like 23,000 acres of a Garden of Eden. The Oak trees would provide money from lumber sales, once they were cleared. Even today antique furniture made of this oak that was cut down in the 1800s is abundant at antique stores and auctions and since it is constructed of ancient growth oak it is nearly indestructible.

The original inhabitants, before the Spanish, were a small well fed tribe called the Mechoopda. The Mechoopda had lived in Chico for thousands of years. One of their main food staples was the high protein acorn nut from the vast forests of oak trees. The Mechoopda had more acorns each year than they could possibly eat. In addition to their usual mainstay of acorn bread and acorn porridge there was an incredible feast of game, fish and fowl that appeared at different times of the year to keep them well off. The Garden of Eden later called Rancho Del Arroyo

Chico had abundance and everything the Mechoopda needed to survive with a comfortable existence. The Mechoopda were so comfortable that they had no need and little time to raid or war with the neighboring tribes. They had no need to fight over resources, such as an adjacent tribe taking their acorns and therefore threatening the Mechoopda children's survival. Food and game was plenty abundant in the lands of the Mechoopda and Maidu Indians of California. The only time they would raid another tribe was to take women for marriage in the tribe to prevent tribal inbreeding. Generally when they needed new blood, however, they would simply use some of their abundant wealth of food, pelts and stone tools, to trade for women. Very little war was necessary for the Mechoopda and California Maidu Natives.

The Mechoopda were a peaceful people and had no problems adapting to the new Spanish, Mexican and now American invaders. Bidwell, the ever smart business man, made a treaty with the Mechoopda and promised them employment on his Rancho, a promise he kept, at least after 1861.

Rancho Chico was owned by William Dickey. With Bidwell's new gold mining wealth he approached Dickey and was able to purchase Rancho Del Arroyo Chico and thus began to build his small empire in the west.

In 1850 the riches of California were so recognized by the Federal government that California became the 31st state admitted to the union on 9 September.

In 1863 with the American Civil War raging in the East, Bidwell was appointed Brigadier General in the Union California State Militia at age 44. From this point on he was known and generally addressed as General Bidwell, a title he relished.

In 1865, now 46 years old, General Bidwell was elected as the California representative to the United States Congress. He moved to Washington D.C. where his luck and timing again blessed him and he met his wife Annie Ellicott Kennedy. In 1868 they were married. In this same year, Bidwell finished the Bidwell mansion which he had started in 1865. He and his new bride moved into the beautiful elaborate mansion. The mansion still stands today, 149 years later.

The nine years since John and Annie Bidwell had been married had been wonderful fulfilling years. John Bidwell had expanded his farm to include fruit trees and abundant agriculture. Annie had made the mansion a focal point for parties and gatherings and entertaining guests. She also worked to bring their Mechoopda employees into mainstream living and made every effort to Christianize them.

Now on New Year's Day 1877 John Bidwell felt as though all his success meant nothing. He felt so tired, so weak, so sick and so helpless. He missed his wife Annie terribly and wished she was in Chico and not in Washington.

He stood out on the front porch of his great three story mansion and thought of what to telegram Annie about her brother. Finally he felt that making it a simple note would suffice as the news was not fully unexpected. The telegram was as follows: Annie, sorrowful regret to inform that your brother John succumbed to his illness this first day of the New Year at 12:50am. Happy in Christ, may he rest in peace, John.

This was the introduction to the New Year of 1877 for General John Bidwell. Fifty minutes into the year 1877, John R. Kennedy, Annie's brother died. John Reynolds Kennedy was 32 years old. He was six days short of his sixth wedding anniversary with his wife, Cora P. (Wayland) Kennedy. John had come to Chico ten years before in 1867 to work for his sister and brother in law as superintendent of orchards on Rancho Bidwell. He had done a fine job planting and nurturing the fertile orchards on Rancho Bidwell and had helped make the Bidwell farms an extreme success and very profitable. John Bidwell would miss his hard work, intelligence and zeal for his work as superintendent of orchards but he also felt a further emptiness and knew he would miss his brother in laws kindness and good council as a friend and brother. As with all death, John Bidwell, knew that death meant the end of conversation with John Kennedy, it is that strange feeling when someone dies, you realize that you can and will no longer speak to that person and you wish that you had more conversations with them in life, but at the point of death all conversation ends.

Now General John Bidwell had to make funeral arrangements for, John R. Kennedy. It would be a busy day but Bidwell could not imagine that the year would continue to get worse, but it did.

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