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By Nicole Brodeur / Times Columnist

## These walls are talking a rich history

Early on, the employees of Marpac Construction were told to tread lightly. The East Kong Yick Building would not be your typical knock-down, haul-out renovation.

The Wing Luke Asian Museum wanted to preserve the Chinese immigrant story that unfolded inside this South King Street walkup. Almost immediately, construction workers began to find history left behind.

Tucked inside a wall crack was a certificate of medical examination for a man named Look Ming, dated March 30, 1930. He sailed from Hong Kong to the Port of Seattle on the SS President McKinley, run by the Dollar Steamship Line.

In the basement, worker Patrick Wilson came across what he thought was a piece of wood. It turned out to be a whalebone that museum officials think was brought to Seattle from Alaska by a Chinese cannery worker.

And one day, in a third-floor meeting room, Wilson was scraping flaking paint when a delicate fresco of flowers emerged.

"Because of that, we found another over here," Wilson said the other day, as he ducked through supporting beams to another wall, bearing another faint painting.

"So now this is the 'Don't touch' room," Wilson said, proudly.

Museum collections manager Bob Fisher called the murals "fascinating. Now we have to figure out how to preserve them."

Cassie Chinn, the museum's program manager, loves that despite their hard hats and steeled-toed boots, the workers are sensitive to things of historic value and have the delicate touch to save them.

"There's been a lot of care by the crew," Chinn said. "I think they get excited every time they find something. It's not an ordinary project."

The East Kong Yick Building — built in 1910 in the 700 block of South King Street — was long considered the heart of Chinatown International District. It was one of two buildings constructed by a group of 170 Chinese immigrants who formed the Kong Yick Investment Company (meaning "for the public benefit") and sold shares to the community. There were storefronts, a slaughterhouse and two floors of 50 living units each, occupied by the laborers who built much of Pioneer Square, King Street Station, the Second Avenue extension and more.



The East Kong Yick Building, long considered the heart of Chinatown International District, has given up treasures during its renovation, including these rent-payment documents and keys from the residential units. Mike Seigel/Seattle Times

The building, shut down in the 1970s, was acquired by the Wing Luke Asian Museum, which launched a \$24.7 million capital campaign. When finished in May 2008, the building will house administrative offices, classrooms and re-created storefronts and apartments, similar to the Lower East Side Tenement Museum in New York City.

"We're preserving the immigrant story," Chinn said. "So there's a ghostlike quality to the place, when you think of the number of people who came through over the years."

The construction workers have proven to be eager partners. Marpac has installed a bin where workers place anything that looks valuable. Then Chinn, Fisher or museum director Ron Chew sift through it to see what might be useful in the new museum space.

They've found photographs. Dollar bills. Two steamer trunks from 1912 that had never been opened. In the basement, they found two coal-burning stoves in near-perfect condition. In another room, two mah-jongg game boards encased in muck.

The other day in the construction office, a lottery machine and an old straw broom sat on the floor below a shelf lined with hard hats.

"The building is just a treasure trove of the history of the neighborhood," Fisher said.

As word has spread about the finds, members of the Chinese community have responded by donating family heirlooms from that time to the museum.

The Yick Fung Co., an import-export company that has been on South King Street since 1910, will be carefully re-created – windows, shelves and all – at the new cultural center.

"This building is connected to our past, filled with stories that echo inside the walls," Chew said. "It's an incredible legacy that we think of every day we work on this project."

Not long ago, worker Jeff Finne found a newspaper from Dec. 23, 1923. He had to put it in a bucket to keep it from falling apart.

Inside was an ad that urged people to come to Washington state to farm, even playing up the paved roads that made it easy to get to market.

Finne's last job was restoring the Wilson Hotel in Anacortes, built in 1890.

"It's enjoyable to work in a building that old, to make it function properly," he said, as he broke for a lunch in one of the down-to-the-bones spaces that used to be three apartments.

Did he mind eating by himself?

In a place this full of history, he said, "You're never alone."



Wing Luke Asian Museum official Cassie Chinn displays a 1930 medical certificate. Mike Seigel/Seattle Times

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