Guide to the Ah Quin Diary Collection MS 209

Finding aid prepared by Katrina Oko-Odoi
Collection processed as part of grant project supported by the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR) with generous funding from The Andrew Mellon Foundation.
San Diego History Center Document Collection
1649 El Prado, Suite 3
San Diego, CA, 92101
619-232-6203
December 21, 2012
**Title:** Ah Quin Diary Collection  
**Identifier/Call Number:** MS 209  
**Contributing Institution:** San Diego History Center Document Collection  
**Language of Material:** English  
**Physical Description:** 1.0 Linear feet(3 boxes)  
**Date (inclusive):** 1876-1902  
**Abstract:** The collection contains the diaries of Chinese migrant Ah Quin from 1876 through 1902.  
**Language of Materials:** Collection materials are in English and Chinese.  
**creator:** Quin, Ah  
**Arrangement**  
Collection is arranged by series:  
Series I: Diaries  
Series II: Photocopies and Transcripts of Diaries  
Items within each series are arranged chronologically.  
**Conditions Governing Access**  
This collection is open for research.  
**Conditions Governing Use**  
The San Diego History Center (SDHC) holds the copyright to any unpublished materials. SDHC Library regulations do apply.  
**Processing Information**  
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**Preferred Citation**  
Ah Quin Diary Collection, MS 209, San Diego History Center Document Collection, San Diego, CA.  
**Comments**  
This finding aid only refers to the English portions of the diaries. The portions of the diaries in Chinese will be addressed upon completion of the annotated version.  
**Immediate Source of Acquisition**  
Accession numbers 861224A, 991104, and 2001.023.  
**Scope and Content**  
This collection contains ten handwritten diaries of Ah Quin during his years residing in Alaska, Santa Barbara, San Francisco and San Diego. The diaries date from 1876 to 1902 and are written in both English and Chinese. Also included is a handwritten English-Chinese Chemicals and Minerals Dictionary.  
**Physical Characteristics and Technical Requirements**  
Several diaries and their bindings are fragile and should be handled with care. Copies of the diaries are available for use.  
**Biographical / Historical Notes**  
Ah Quin was born on December 5, 1848 in a small village in the Hoiping (Kaiping) District of Guandong Province of southern China. He was the eldest son of parents who were farmers. His family moved to Canton when he was young providing him with an opportunity for an education, which included English at an American missionary school. Like many Cantonese of the period, his family sent him to California in 1868. The family name was Tom, but as is often the case with Chinese immigrants, government officials misinterpreted their names, and he became known as Ah Quin. He spent his first six years in San Francisco’s Chinatown, where he continued his studies at a Christian mission and worked at a variety of jobs including that of houseboy and cook. Around 1873, Ah Quin moved to Santa Barbara where he began to learn merchandising from an uncle, continued his mission studies, served as a houseboy, and developed contacts with important men of the area, such as Judge Charles Huse. In Santa Barbara he decided to sign on for a year as a cook with a company that mined coal in Alaska. While in Alaska he cut off his queue, which was a demonstration that he was planning to make America his home.  
On returning to Santa Barbara, Ah Quin began to survey the job possibilities elsewhere in California. He visited San Diego in 1878 and established contacts with friends and relatives, and also met George Marston and Reverend Camp. He spent two years in San Francisco working at a number of odd jobs and eventually he took a job at the Presidio as a cook and servant.
In 1880, he received letters from George Marston and Reverend Camp asking him to come to San Diego to serve as labor broker for the California Southern Railroad. He started a store in San Diego's Chinatown as a base of operations and worked for the railroad for five years procuring their Chinese labor, supplying the work gangs with goods from his store. He returned to San Francisco to marry Sue Leong, whom he had met at the Presbyterian Mission. Ah Quin and his wife, Sue, raised twelve children in their two story home on Third Street in San Diego. After he left the railroad, he began to expand his merchandising business and branch out into real estate. He acquired property around the city and county and leased land to farmers to raise vegetables in Mission Valley and in Bonita along the Sweetwater River. Ah Quin was an influential and highly respected member of the early Chinese community and was given the unofficial title of “Mayor of Chinatown.” In 1914, he was struck by a motorcycle near his home and died at the age of 66.

**Subjects and Indexing Terms**

California Central Railroad Company (1857-1964).
California Pacific Railroad Company.
California Southern Railroad Company.
Camp, Henry J., Rev.
Dyer, H. B.
Gourley, E. T.
Grant, Ulysses S. (Ulysses Simpson), 1822-1885
Harrison, Benjamin, 1833-1901
Hayes, Benjamin, 1815-1877
Hi, Wong
Huse, Charles, Judge
Kimball, Frank
Leong, Sue
Mannasse, Joe
Marston, George White, 1850-1946
Monteith, G. W.
Otis, H. G.
Quin, Ah
Quin, Anna
Quin, Franklyn
Quin, Horton Louis
Quin, Lily
Quin, Maggy
Russell, James
Sessions, Frank
Stearns, John P.
Thompson, A. K.
Victor, Jacob Nash
Alaska
Cabrillo National Monument (San Diego, Calif.)
Colton (Calif.)
Fort Point (San Francisco, Calif.)
National City (Calif.)
Presidio of San Francisco (Calif.)
Riverside (Calif.)
San Diego (Calif.)
San Francisco (Calif.)
Santa Barbara (Calif.)
Series I: Diaries

Box-folder 1:1  Diary 1, 1877 June 12-1878 February 28
Scope and Content
The diary begins the day that Ah Quin leaves Santa Barbara for Alaska. Most of the journal documents his boat trip to Alaska and his adjustment to Alaskan weather and living in a mining camp. Ah Quin’s life is very solitary, and most of his free time is spent alone reading or taking walks. He struggles with mosquitoes, gets bitten frequently and has bad reactions to their bites (August 21, 1877). He sees snow for the first time and experiences a harsh winter, suffering from rheumatoid arthritis in his right leg (November 16, 1877). He spends Thanksgiving and Christmas at the mining camp, cooking holiday dinner for the few employees there, spending rather lonely days by himself when others went out to socialize. During his first year in Alaska, he experiences three small earthquakes (December 11, 1877). He struggles being so far away from friends and family on Chinese New Year and worries that the celebration he used to help plan in Santa Barbara would not be the same without him (January 31, 1878). Many of the later entries in this diary consist of transcriptions of scripture from the Bible, which Ah Quin read regularly.

Box-folder 1:2  Diary 2, 1878 March 1-July 23
Scope and Content
Ah Quin is in Alaska working as a cook throughout this diary. He is more accustomed to the climate, the job, and the people than when he first arrived, and spends most of his days cooking and reading. He has become very devoted to Christianity and reading the Bible, and spends many hours each day reading and transcribing Bible verses. He takes the momentous step of cutting off his queue (June 1, 1878), which he celebrates with his companions. He has very few acquaintances and interaction with other people, but he does occasionally chat with his boss or some of the other administrators of the mine who live there. By the end of June, Ah Quin decides to return to California, and he leaves the mining camp on a boat on July 22, 1878. More entries in this diary are dominated by Bible scripture as Ah Quin becomes more committed to his religious study.

Box-folder 1:3  Diary 3, 1878 August 12-1879 August 28
Scope and Content
Ah Quin had recently returned to Santa Barbara at the beginning of this diary. He spends his first few weeks back in town catching up with old friends and acquaintances, giving them the gifts he brought back, and considering job possibilities. He spends a good amount of time at the local Mission school where he helps in the kitchen and the garden. Ah Quin travels to San Diego by steamer with a friend in September, returning to Santa Barbara at the end of October. While in San Diego, Ah Quin becomes acquainted with the Marstons as well as Reverend Camp, and attends their Sunday/Bible schools, earning the respect and admiration of Mrs. Marston. In February 1879, Ah Quin appears to begin working a regular job as cook and servant for two men, Mr. H.B. Dyer and Mr. H.G. Otis, in San Francisco. During this period, he befriends three Chinese men who live next door, and visit them frequently during his free time. It appears that Ah Quin either leaves or is relieved of his job with Dyer and Otis in late August. There are several pages of Chinese at the back of the diary.
Scope and Content
Ah Quin spends the last few days of August 1879 looking for a new job. He is finally hired as a servant for Medcalfe at the Presidio on September 1, 1879. He has some work disputes with his superiors and loses several fellow Chinese friends who are fired from the Presidio. Ah Quin sees former President Ulysses S. Grant when he visits San Francisco (September 20, 1879), and current President Hayes when he visits the city the following year (September 12, 1880). He talks about visiting a local Chinese brothel on October 31, 1879, and a white brothel on November 27, 1879. He visits friends in town and attends the Chinese theater often. He occasionally sends letters and money home to his family when friends travel back to China. Ah Quin becomes more interested and involved in Chinese American rights and politics, and witnesses the fire in the Chinese theater in early 1880 (March 9, 1880). He makes the decision to move to San Diego in October 1880 after being offered employment with the new railroad company there. He leaves for San Diego on October 24, 1880, and his entries for the year end there. There are several later entries in Chinese and some notes in the back of the diary in Chinese.

Scope and Content
By 1884, Ah Quin has settled down in San Diego, married, and had at least one daughter with his wife Sue Leong. Having been in San Diego and worked for the railroad company for more than three years, he is very influential around town, and is one of the most prominent members of San Diego’s Chinese community. During the year, he travels often for his work with the railroad. He settles several disputes of fellow Chinese laborers, and faces challenges getting paid in a timely manner from his employer. Sometimes he serves as interpreter or mediator in legal cases. Part of his job is recruiting new laborers for work on the railroad. In September, he recruits over 100 Chinese laborers to work for his company. Ah Quin spends the last couple months of the year at the railroad company camps, mainly in Temecula and Fallbrook.

Scope and Content
Ah Quin suffers major financial difficulties this year. After receiving a loan from a local businessman and failing to pay it back, he is forced to gather up most of the money he has to pay it off in September. This leaves him and his family very poor for the rest of the year. Ah Quin’s wife also comes down with consumption and is sick off and on throughout the year. Meanwhile she is also pregnant with their sixth child, to whom she gives birth on August 23, 1891, a healthy baby girl. Ah Quin is ill for several weeks in late November through mid-December, but recovers by the end of the year. There are some gaps between entries and writing in Chinese.

Scope and Content
This year, Ah Quin and his wife continue to have financial and health problems. Ah Quin is unable to find work very often, and his wife continues to suffer from consumption. His wife and baby Lily contract the flu in January but they both recover well. Ah Quin’s adopted daughter Wong Hi is married in August, and he hosts the wedding in his family’s home. Ah Quin continues to face legal and financial problems related to the many loans that he has defaulted on. Entries in this diary are much more brief and sparse than in earlier diaries, and there is more writing in Chinese.
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<td>Box-folder 2:3</td>
<td>Diary 8, 1894 June 12-August 13</td>
<td>There are very few entries in this diary, it is mostly blank. There is once again a good amount of writing in Chinese. Ah Quin records entries about harvesting potatoes and the other crops grown on his land and selling them. He also writes about his son Franklyn hurting his arm, and then getting sick with another illness.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Box-folder 2:4</td>
<td>Diary 9, 1895 January 1-November 29</td>
<td>There are very few entries in this diary, it is mostly blank. There is once again a good amount of writing in Chinese. Ah Quin’s family continues to grow, his son Horton Louis is born on June 16, 1895. Ah Quin is increasingly involved in interpreting for court cases involving Chinese plaintiffs, and this seems to be the extent of his work outside the home.</td>
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<td>Box-folder 2:5</td>
<td>Diary 10, 1902 April 12-May 9</td>
<td>There are only a handful of entries, many written at least half in Chinese. Ah Quin seems to suffer from some chronic health problems that keep him resting at home a lot of the time. He travels to Los Angeles with one of his sons on business, but isn’t successful. It appears that his wife is pregnant again.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Box-folder 3:2</td>
<td>Diary 10, loose material, undated</td>
<td>Paper from pocket at back of the diary. It reads: “Lam Pak Kun living in Santa Barbara has entered the Chinese Young Men’s Christian Association, July 10, 1874. Presbyterian Mission, 800 Stockton St.” The paper also has writing in Chinese.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Box-folder 3:3</td>
<td>“Ah Quin 1876 Alaska” (loose sheet), 1876</td>
<td>Handwritten Bible passages from the Gospels of Mark, Luke, and John.</td>
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Series II: Photocopies and Transcripts of Diaries

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<td>Diary 2, 1878 March 1-July 23</td>
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<td>Diary 3, 1878 August 12-1879 August 28</td>
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<td>Diary 4, 1879 August 29-1880 October 27</td>
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<td>Diary 5, 1884 January 1-December 31</td>
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<td>Diary 7, 1892 January 1-December 31</td>
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<td>Diary 8, 1894 June 12-August 13</td>
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<td>Box-folder 3:12</td>
<td>Diary 9, 1895 January 1-November 29</td>
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<td>Diary 10, 1902 April 12-May 9</td>
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<td>Box-folder 3:14</td>
<td>Chemicals and Minerals Dictionary, undated</td>
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<td>Box-folder 3:15</td>
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