“Six Blown to Eternity”

On the evening of 18 July 1898, so the story goes, a Chinese man by the name of Gung Ung Chang, or Gong Wong Chang, killed another Chinese man named Ham Si Sing due to a quarrel over a $48 lottery ticket. In order to evade the police, Chang fled to his place of work, the Western Fuse and Explosive Company located on the corner of Clark (Clement) and A (45th) streets. He barricaded himself in the magazine building, which contained at least five tons of gunpowder. Chang threatened to blow up the building if anyone came near.

Several deputy sheriffs and other law enforcers took turns guarding the magazine, while they repeated demands for surrender throughout the night. At 5 am the following morning, Chang said he wanted to speak with the officers. As they approached, the explosion took place. Constable Koch, four deputy sheriffs, a neighbor, and Chang died in the blast. The buildings of the fuse company were completely destroyed, along with four houses on Clark Street. Forty nearby houses were also severely damaged, as was the Pacific Cordage Company buildings, which were long abandoned by this time. Newspapers headlined the event and flags were requested flown at half-mast.

The aftermath was horrific. Neighbors were injured and homeless; the explosion was felt as far as San José. Body parts were reportedly found several blocks away. The neighbors threatened to sue the fuse company for damages. Most rebuilt their houses. The Western Fuse and Manufacturing Company did not plan to rebuild in that location according to newspaper accounts (Oakland Enquirer 1898; Oakland Tribune 1898).

Anti-Chinese sentiment during this period was strong, and the story must be viewed with caution. The series of Chinese Exclusion acts that began to be passed in 1882 were still in effect. The height of terrorism against the Chinese population that had occurred in the late 1880s had subsided, although by no means were they free from discrimination at the end of the 19th century. Businesses advertised that they operated without the help of Chinese labor. Being denied most amenable employment, many Chinese were forced to work in dangerous occupations, such as at the fuse manufactory.

Newspaper articles about the 1898 explosion were unforgiving, although some attempt was made to pardon the many other Chinese men who lived and worked for the company. Only one interview with neighbor Charles Stephenson offered another possible explanation of the event. Stephenson reported that he saw a plank fall outside the door to the magazine just prior to the explosion and believed that the plank was being used to force the door open. This account was repudiated by the deputies who said “no force was used on the barricade” (Oakland Tribune 1898). The truth may never be known since it was far easier to blame a Chinese scapegoat already accused of murder than to admit that deputies may have precipitated the devastating blast.