

Cor: ADAMS & SAN PEDRO St.  
**C. F. O. GASOLINE STATION**

Phone PR 7-9776

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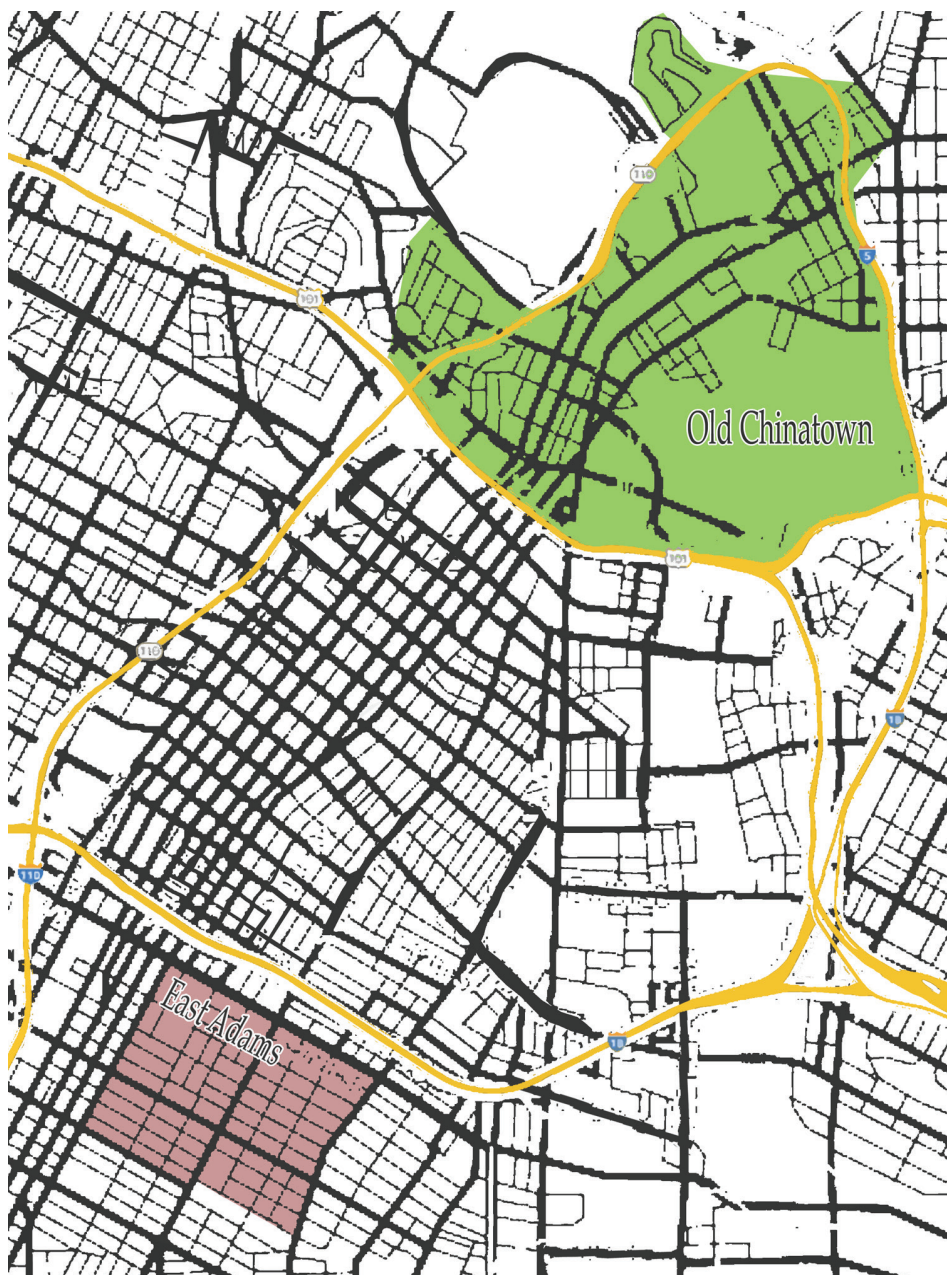
**Specialize:**

**SHELLUBRICATION  
MOTOR TUNE  
BRAKE RELINING  
GENERATOR  
TIRES — BATTERY**

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# South Los Angeles

Old Chinatown and East Adams



Old Chinatown was the predominant Chinese community in Los Angeles from its beginnings in the early 1850s, and continued to grow through the 1850s.

By the Early 1910s the neighborhood would begin to decline due to a number of factors both internal and external, ranging from the development of City Market, a Chinese operated produce market and the surrounding neighborhood, to the decision by the California Supreme Court to allow the neighborhood to be partially demolished for the construction of Los Angeles' Union Station in 1938.

With this the residence would begin moving their homes and businesses to a number of other neighborhoods. Among them the East Adams Neighborhood growing out of an established Chinese Presbyterian Church and the Kwang Hing Lung grocery, along with its proximity to City Market a predominantly Chinese owned produce market. This would result in a more than 17 time increase in the neighborhoods Chinese population from 1930 to 1940.

Two of the people who moved were Fong and Pearl Chin, both immigrants to California, though Pearl an African-American from Texas, and Fong an immigrant from China. They meet when Pearl moved to Chinatown in 1914 to teach English. Fong was one of her students. They promptly fell in love and married.

Their eldest son, Abraham, was born in 1917 and spent much of his childhood in Old Chinatown, describing it as a very crowded environment, no yards or open spaces, just wall to wall structures often with shops and living areas mixed together. Although he does not look upon this negatively, regarding it as “one of the most colorful and exiting periods of [his] life.”

He recalls the banquets and kite flying, and a general friendliness within the community. Particularly the broad familial nature everyone seemed to have, at least for children who all held their elders in similarly high esteem, regardless of an actual family relation.

Even in Old Chinatown Abraham and his brothers had a unique upbringing. Often they would speak to their father in Chinese, and to their mother in English. Fong Chin was active in the politics of Old Chinatown and served as president of several community associations within the neighborhood. Pearl Chin was a Christian, and sent her children to a Methodist school as children.

Together the Chin brothers experienced a blended cultural upbringing even before their move out of Old Chinatown, and perhaps prepared them for their experiences in East Adams. Abraham credits these influence from his parents for instilling him with a strict sense of honesty and discipline.

Growing up in the neighborhood, Abraham, and his brothers Howard and George would attend nearby Jefferson High School. While in school the three would work as gas attendants, and when the opportunity came to rent a station on the corner of Adams and Griffith, they purchased franchise rights and operated it under the name Chin Bros.

However the operation of the station was keep strictly under the terms set by the owner. Seeking greater operational freedom they inquired for the price of a run down and vacant station on the corner of Adams and San Pedro, a few blocks west.



To finance the \$12,500 to purchase and renovate the property they recruited classmates Wesley Fong and Henry Ong, who supplied the capital, as well as the "F" and "O" in C.F.O. To reduce the cost of renovating and refitting the station they arranged with a contractor to supply the labor themselves, spending the night-shifts from Chin Bros. down the block digging ditches and clearing the old canopy.

With this C.F.O. became only the second gas station in Los Angeles to be Chinese owned and independently operated. A significant step for its owners, and for Los Angeles' Chinese community



However, the station was certainly operated as if its primary investors were high school students. The station had a Basketball team it would regularly take to competition.

Attributing their victories not to frequent practice, but the superior calisthenic benefits of long hours of hard-work servicing cars. Work schedules were often created to leave room for fishing or hunting trips, or days at the beach during high tide.

Although C.F.O. was still a business, and a successful one at that. It immediately drew significant business within the neighborhood, and would be featured in Shell Progress, the national trade magazine of Shell Oil, in the early 1960. Weekly meetings would be held to teach employees some additional aspects of service station work or automotive maintenance, often invite guest speakers from Shell or Goodyear, and other automotive companies to lecture about their products. However, in C.F.O fashion, these meetings would often transform into barbecues shortly afterwards.

All of this left C.F.O. both as a neighborhood hangout and an ideal place of employment for the neighborhood's youth, burgeoning with America's mid-century car culture.



There was typically a wait-list to work at the station. Opening with just 5 employees, the station would at its peak employ 32 people.

While this could have allowed the station to be extremely selective with the hiring, Abraham's the most important criteria when hiring were enthusiasm, energy, ability, honesty, and integrity.



He relates one instance where he interviewed a person who had been convicted of felony theft. He was so struck by the honesty of the interviewee that he decided to overlook this part of his past and hired him. He felt that the character of the work would do much to reform them and build upon the honesty he felt was still there.

He recalls a time when he sent this employee to the bank to make a cash withdrawal. When they returned they found that the teller had given them \$2,000 more than they intended. When they asked Abraham what they should do, he replied "I'm going to leave that entirely up to you." The employee passed this test of their character, returning the money to the bank, and as a reward was treated to dinner.

This experience encapsulates well the effect Abraham hoped his business would have on the people it employed and served, as well as the community more broadly.

Through the years the Chinese community in East Adams would begin to dissipate, but C.F.O. continued to operate in the same manner it had. Health would force George and Howard to make an early exit, but Abraham, Westley and Henry would remain at C.F.O. until its close.

The C.F.O. Station would operate until 1987, when the remaining owners would sell and retire. By this time Abraham was unable to do much of the mechanical work, and shifting demographic making the neighborhood predominantly Spanish speaking prevented him from communicating easily with his customers, the part of his work he enjoyed the most.

Despite his hopes that the new owner would take advantage of the station's name and reputation, continuing to operate the station or even create a C.F.O. franchise, the station was quickly demolished and the land used for commercial development.





Speaking on his time in East Adams, Abraham related back to his childhood in Old Chinatown. Saying that, where Old Chinatown was a homogeneous and cloistered community, the East Adams neighborhood was exceptionally diverse for the 1930s. He related that this taught him, and the Chinese community more broadly, to be “good neighbors.”

When asked to reflect on his life and his time in East Adams he replied:

When I reflect back on my life, one of the richest and most enjoyable periods of my life were the days at the service station where I met a host of Chinese men that I became lifelong friends with. We just enjoyed working together and had a lot of fun together. In fact, if I had to do it over again, and I could have become a lawyer or a doctor, I wouldn't do that. I wouldn't change things at all. I would still like to do what I did in the past.

