

## Museum Notes

by Kristen Parrott, curator  
for the week of April 29 – May 5, 2018

The month of May is “Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month”, a time to reflect on the history of immigrants to the U.S. from Asia and the Pacific Islands. You might be tempted to think that this doesn’t affect Vernon County, but it actually does. For instance, six years ago in this column we looked at the history of Chinese laundries in Vernon County. Today we will take a closer look at one of the Chinese-Americans who operated a laundry business here in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and explore his connection with our current focus on World War I.

100 years ago, in April of 1918, Yep Fook Loy of Viroqua went off to fight in the Great War with other new soldiers drafted from Vernon County. Yep was his family name, Fook was his generational name (all the males of his generation in his family would have had this name), and Loy was his personal name. But, the army and many other Americans assumed that Yep was his “first” name.

Yep Fook Loy was born in 1890 in China. His father was a native of San Francisco, CA, who had travelled to China, probably in order to marry. Chinese immigrants began to arrive in the U.S. in large numbers in the 1840s. Many of them lived in San Francisco, surviving despite laws that restricted them to a limited number of occupations, and prohibited them from marrying non-Chinese. It’s possible that Yep Fook Loy arrived in the U.S. after the San Francisco earthquake of 1906, along with many other children born in China to U.S. fathers.

Loy came to Viroqua around 1908, when he was only 18. He probably worked for someone else for a few years, and then he set up on his own in the laundry business. In 1914, he advertised in the Viroqua High School yearbook: “Chinese Laundry, Good Work Guaranteed, Yep Fook Loy, Proprietor.” In 1917, he bought the small brick building at 207 N. Main Street and moved his business there.

When he was called up to serve in the army, he arranged for another Chinese-American to run the laundry in his absence. Loy officially enlisted on April 2, 1918, when he was 28 years old. In July of that year, the Viroqua Congregational Church dedicated a service flag honoring 37 of its members who were serving in the war, and one of the stars on the flag was for Yep Loy.

In the army, Loy was assigned to Battery E of the 27<sup>th</sup> Artillery, in the Coast Artillery Corps. The CAC handled heavy artillery, both in defense of the U.S. coasts and in France along the railways. We have very little information about Loy’s military service, but it appears that he served stateside.

He was discharged two days after Christmas in December 1918, with the war just over. By 1920, he was living in Minneapolis, again running his own laundry. Despite having served in the U.S. Army, he and other Chinese-Americans were not allowed to become full U.S. citizens. They were not granted that right until the Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed in 1943.

Yep Fook Loy died in November of 1950 and was buried in Fort Snelling National Cemetery in Minnesota. Arrangements for his burial were made by a Mr. Guy Yep of Minneapolis, perhaps his son. Yep Fook Loy is just a footnote in history, but he’s an interesting part of Vernon County’s World War I story.