

Tom Ying

The Hard Undaunted Life of an Early Chinese Immigrant to the Black Range

By Garland D. Bills



Photo reported to be of Tom Ying as a young man. Black Range Museum.

This article concerns one of those remarkable immigrants who arrive with nothing and overcome daunting obstacles to achieve success in an alien and hostile environment. This industrious immigrant came from China, and wound up in Lake Valley and Hillsboro in the Black Range. He is known to us as Tom Ying.¹

Chinese immigrants to the U.S. in the last half of the 19th century suffered some of the worst racism of U.S. history. Historical details about racist and discriminatory treatment of minorities are often hard to come by. The dominant majority typically writes its perspective on historical events, and the minority perspective is too often unexpressed. Consequently, our understanding of the minority situation is usually limited. The data are often murky.

Archaeologists also have to work with very murky data. Having recently read some work about ancient hominids, I want to cite a couple of pertinent quotes. In their 2021 online report “Unfreezing the Ice Age,” David Graeber and David Wengrow state, “It is very difficult to resist the temptation to make up stories about what might have happened.” And in his 2020 book *Fossil Men*, Kermit Pattison says, “our reach for narrative often exceeds our grasp of facts.”

The resort to imagination in the face of murky data is natural. The species *Homo sapiens* is often labeled the tool-maker, but a more distinguishing label should be *Homo sapiens* the story-teller. Humans tend always to create a story of explanation when they fail to understand something. Even more fateful, “story” in English can refer to “lie, falsehood.” And of course, the reach for narrative is especially characteristic of historians and journalists. The emphasis in both professions is to tell a good story.

The over-emphasis on telling a good story with minimal basis in fact is typical, for example, of David Cushman’s 1965 newspaper account of Tom Ying’s life, “Ying Was Hillsboro Character.” Unfortunately, that article was generally accepted as the reliable biographical history of Ying until the books on Sadie Orchard by Patsy King (2008, pp. 97-104) and the Hillsboro Historical Society (2019, pp. 132-44).

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The early history of Tom Ying is indeed murky. We don’t even know his real name, though a 2011 online article by Hillsboro resident, Max Yeh, suggests it might be Ying Seng. To begin to know this man, let me begin at the end, where we have more information. A brief obituary for Tom Ying appeared in the *Truth or Consequences Herald* on September 18, 1959:

¹This article is adapted from my reports on Ying in the 2019 Hillsboro Historical Society book, *Sadie Orchard, Madam of New Mexico’s Black Range*, especially pp. 132-44, and in a paper presented at the 2022 annual meeting of the Historical Society of New Mexico in Las Cruces.

Tom Ying, Long Time County Resident, Dies

Funeral Services are slated at 2 p. m. today for Tom Ying, a long time resident of Sierra County. Ying died Monday [September 14] in a local hospital at the age of 93.

Ying was born in China in 1866. He arrived in San Francisco, Calif., when he was 13 years old. Seven years later he moved to Lake Valley, N. M. where he assi[s]ted a brother with operating a cafe business.

In 1915 Ying opened his own cafe at Hillsboro and had lived there since that time. He was never married. His brother returned home to China many years ago.

This narrative appears to present facts, but appearances are deceiving. We don't know who wrote or provided the information for Tom Ying's obituary. It may have been his Hillsboro neighbor and friend, Marie Disinger, who acquired his home by paying delinquent taxes. Or it might have been the certifying physician for his Record of Funeral, H. F. Maloney, who was related to Disinger by marriage.

Instead of relying solely on a newspaper account, where do we go for facts about an early Chinese immigrant? Maybe the decennial U.S. censuses. Consider Ying's birth, which the obituary gives as 1866. Ying first appears in the U.S. Census of 1900, which gives his birth date as 1869. In the 1910 Census it's 1867. Ten years later it's 1866. In 1930 it's 1867 again. In 1940 it's 1865. Why would Ying seem so uncertain of his own birth year? Yeh suggests it's because he would have "to memorize all the Chinese names of years in proper sequence and count back to his birth year's name to calculate the Christian year." Well, the 1866 birth provided in the obituary seems like a reasonable guess in lieu of facts.

What about his arrival in the U.S.? The obituary suggests it was in 1879, consistent with the obituary's perhaps startling claim that he immigrated across the Pacific as a 13-year-old. U.S. Census reports of his immigration year are even more variable than the birth year, ranging from 1876 to 1885. We may be sure that he arrived in the U.S. before Congress passed the racist Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 (a law that was not repealed until 1943). We might guess that a more reasonable age to migrate would have been at least 16, but who knows? We don't have the facts.

We may assume that Tom Ying was among the long wave of Cantonese lured to the U.S., first in the 1850s by the California Gold Rush (hence the common Chinese name for California being translatable as "Gold Mountain"), and later as cheap labor for railroad construction, especially for the building of the transcontinental lines. A lot has been written about the Chinese who built the First Transcontinental Railroad that moved east from San Francisco (e.g., Chang 2020, Karuka 2019, Wunder 2018). But this line was completed in 1869, well before Ying is likely to have arrived if he was born anywhere near the 1866 date given in the obituary.

Unfortunately, I have found almost nothing about the Chinese who worked on the Second Transcontinental Railroad that moved east from Los Angeles through Arizona and New Mexico. A rare bit of information is an online piece by Raymond Chong, which is important but truly amounts to little more than notes for a more comprehensive treatment. The book by David Devine and the online article by Richard Boehle on the second transcontinental line focus on politics and economics and tell us little about the Chinese workers.

If Tom Ying did indeed arrive in the U.S. in 1879 as stated in the obituary, he came with 9,600 other Chinese immigrants that year, a rather typical annual number, although in anticipation of approval of the Chinese Exclusion Act, the number soared to 39,000 in 1882 (Lew-Williams 2018:253-4).

The racist discrimination and violence toward the Chinese was extreme, though again often murky in details. As Lew-Williams (2018:17) says,



A second photo reported to be of Tom Ying as a young man. Black Range Museum.

When Chinese immigrants arrived in the U.S. West ..., they were met with violence. They dodged rocks thrown by children as they labored ..., guarded against armed protestors as they mined ..., and fled angry mobs in the streets And while this violence did not arise every day or affect everyone, it was common enough to loom large over every encounter across the color line. The traces of this white-on-Chinese violence are at once ubiquitous and hidden in the historical record, overwhelming in their abundance and yet difficult to see.

The white violence ranged from intimidation and threats to beatings and burning of homes and even to murders, massacres, and lynchings. This violence occurred primarily on the West Coast, but extended across the West. Among the episodes in New Mexico was a major incident in Silver City, just over the Black Range from Lake Valley and Hillsboro. As reported in Lincoln's *Golden Era* newspaper of December 3, 1885: "The citizens of Silver City have had a roundup among the Chinese, and have ordered them to 'git.'" A clip from the *Silver City Enterprise* makes clear the local newspaper's perspective (cited in the *Sierra County Advocate* of January 23, 1886):

Up in Raton they boycott all who "support and protect" the Chinese. Here the society is so ashamed of itself that it does not let the world know what it is about. It is a shame for the people of Raton to "protect" the Chinese. They ought to stand aside and let the boycotters kill them, as it would give their town a good name.

Such hatred toward the Chinese was widespread in our region. "In two months Socorro has reduced her Chinese census from seventy-five to twenty-four," reports the *Las Vegas Daily Gazette* on April 25, 1886. And the same paper's issue of April 20, 1886 had a cryptic note on Deming: "A short time ago Deming had an anti-Chinese movement. Now she has another laundry."

So what did our federal government do in response to this anti-Chinese violence? It approved a series of actions not to protect the Chinese but to restrict Chinese immigration. Most significant for Tom was the Chinese Restriction (or Exclusion) Act of 1882, that not only curbed new immigration but also placed restraints on those already here, denying readmittance to those who might return to China for a visit. An even more heartless action occurred seven years earlier when the 1875 Page Act banned immigration of Chinese women. These policies, as well as local racism, may have had something to do with the fact that Tom never married.

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It has been suggested that two early photos we have are of Tom Ying — the photo at the beginning of this article, and the photo above. If so, they show him as a very young man dressed in the manner of the Chinese railroad workers of that day. A couple of our Hillsboro old-timers born in the 1930s, Gloria Spellman and Patricia Brown Nay, report that when they were children, Ying told them that he had once worked on the railroad.

Ying very likely worked on that Second Transcontinental Railroad, which was completed with great ceremony at Deming in March of 1881 when the Southern Pacific and the AT&SF lines met there. Perhaps he continued working on the rail lines to the east, since the Southern Pacific continued laying rails on to El Paso and beyond. Maybe he was even involved in building the new AT&SF spur that reached the silver-mining boom town of Lake Valley in 1884. Maybe that's what brought him to Lake Valley. Maybe. But I can find no facts to support this lovely narrative.

But we do know that Ying settled down in Lake Valley. According to Patsy King (p. 97), the *Lake Valley News* of August 1, 1885 reported, "A Chinaman is about to open a restaurant in the Meredith Building, and hereafter travelers will have a place at which to be refreshed." Reference with an ethnic label without further identification was typical of white news reports about minorities. Perhaps this Chinaman was Tom or his brother?

The earliest more specific link I've been able to find is that a Charles Ying paid taxes on an adobe structure boarding house in Lake Valley in 1891 and 1892. Then there is this intriguing note of November 20, 1891 in the *Sierra County Advocate*, the Hillsboro newspaper: "Charlie Ying, the Cosmopolitan chef, has a cousin who draws a salary of \$10,000 a year. He [the cousin] is in the employ of the Southern Pacific company, and spends part of his time in China." This Charles or Charlie Ying, a cook at the Lake Valley hotel, might well have been the brother cited in Tom's obituary. In any case, the cousin mentioned would seem to be one of those Chinese leaders who very profitably recruited immigrants. Did this cousin arrange the migration of the two boys? The mention of being employed by the Southern Pacific is significant; the Southern Pacific company built the west part of the Second Transcontinental line from Los Angeles to Deming.

In any case, Tom's obituary claims he came to Lake Valley in 1886, and the legend says he had an eating place there in the 1890s. But it is only in 1902 that we find his name documented. Tom Ying was the big winner in the County Commissioners' approval of "scalp certificates," presumably documenting kills of predator animals (*Sierra County Advocate*, January 24, 1902). He was awarded \$34 while the other 27 men listed received only \$2 to \$22. Had Ying done a lot of hunting and trapping? Maybe, but not necessarily. If he was operating a restaurant, he might have accepted these pelts as payment for meals. In any case, it demonstrates Ying's flexibility and pragmatism. In addition, Kingston historian Barbara Lovell informs me in a personal communication that Tom paid personal property taxes in Lake Valley in 1902 and 1903.

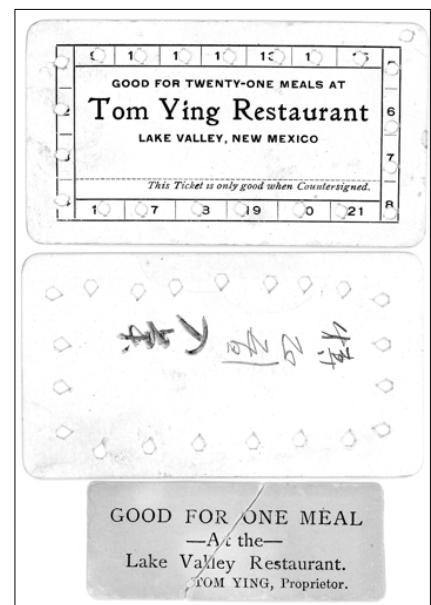
Tom Ying, immigrant from China, would certainly have experienced the anti-Chinese racism of the times. Consider this April 15, 1893 news bite that a correspondent in Lake Valley reported in the *Kingston Weekly Shaft* newspaper under "Lake Valley Items":

Stovall and Gibson, is the name of a new restaurant recently started here. For a good square meal it's just the place, and if ye editors do not believe it, just come down and see for yourselves. The "Chinezers" must now seek "new fields and pastures green."

It seems reasonable to assume that the targets of the hate exhibited in this newspaper note were Tom and his brother.

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But Tom endured, seemingly undaunted. Then in 1895 a devastating fire wiped out the businesses on Lake Valley's main street. *The Black Range* newspaper's listing of damages in its issue of June 7, 1895 included this: "Restaurant, next door building, and fixtures, \$750; the proprietors of the restaurant were Chinamen and they had their savings in a trunk which they could not save." Perhaps these two Chinese men who lost everything in the fire were Tom Ying and his brother. It happens that another person who lost his place of employment in that Lake Valley fire was Carl Beals, brother of Dr. William Guy Beals, both Anglo immigrants from Michigan. However, Carl also had homesteaded a property in Tierra Blanca, twelve miles or so to the north. Five years after the fire, the 1900 U.S. Census shows Tom Ying as a member of Carl's household in Tierra Blanca—as a servant! We may speculate that the two got to know each other in Lake Valley and that Carl brought to his other home a fellow sufferer from the Lake Valley disaster. And Tom may have become sufficiently well-known to merit this brief note in the *Sierra County Advocate* of August 14, 1903: "Tom, the sick Chinaman left this week for California for medical treatment." (By the way, serving as servants in more prosperous homes was a common role for Chinese immigrants. For example, just up the road in Hillsboro, the



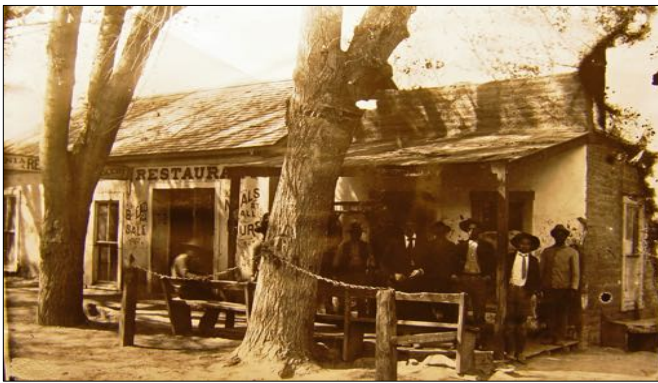
The front and back of a meal card, and a complimentary meal ticket for Tom Ying's restaurant in Lake valley, c. 1910. Black Range Museum.

1885 New Mexico Territorial Census lists a man named Chin Lee as “cook” in the household of George M. Fuller, prominent superintendent of the Hillsboro Hydraulic Mining Company.)

But undaunted as ever, our immigrant hero shows up ten years later back in the town of Lake Valley. The 1910 federal census lists Tom Ying as a single head of household renting a house in Lake Valley and as a wage earner with “cook” cited as his occupation. It might be about this time, around 1910, that two meal cards and a complimentary meal ticket now at the Black Range Museum were produced for the Tom Ying Restaurant, which he also labels the Lake Valley Restaurant.²

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So, Tom endured. But Lake Valley did not. The town continued the drastic population decline that had begun with the repeal of the Sherman Silver Purchase Act in 1893. Around 1915, when he was already a half-century old, Tom Ying decided to seek out those recommended “new fields and pastures green.” He moved 17 miles north to the more economically stable Hillsboro, the county seat. There he opened a café. The *Sierra County Advocate* of February 11, 1916 makes mention that “Tom Ying came up from Lake Valley” with two others, though he may have already been living in Hillsboro. And the issue of December 8, 1916 reports that “Tom Ying has opened a bakery and is doing a landslide business.”



“The Chinaman’s café,” Hillsboro, c. 1895. Black Range Museum.

The widely circulated photo at left depicts “The Chinaman’s café” in Hillsboro. Most reports claim that it belonged to Tom Ying. Many have also reported that it depicts the building that is now our Black Range Museum. It is not. A moment of careful observation demonstrates it is obviously not the same structure.

Moreover, the sign in front partially obscured by the tree actually reads “California Restaurant.” This restaurant was in business way before Tom Ying’s arrival. It was advertised in the local newspaper in 1894 as operated by Hop Hing, and in 1895 as operated by L. H. Kie. Perhaps the epithet “Chinaman’s café” derives from those earlier

proprietors. I suppose it’s possible that Ying took over that space when he moved to Hillsboro, but we have no evidence whatsoever to support that possibility.

But Ying did indeed become closely associated with the building that would become the Black Range Museum. This adobe structure was originally built before 1882 for George Fuller’s Hillsboro Hydraulic Mining Company. By 1900 it became the Ocean Grove Hotel operated by Sadie Orchard, the famous madam. And Sadie did in fact bring in Tom Ying to run her hotel restaurant about 1917.

The partnership of two successful and self-motivated business people such as Orchard and Ying might have been considered a winner. But there were problems. One problem might have been that by 1917 Sadie was already operating two other hotels in Hillsboro, all three serving food. We find no record of the understanding that Sadie reached with Tom to lure him to the Ocean Grove. But it is curious that already in the 1920 Census Tom reports that he owned, free of mortgage, his residence on Main Street (that is, the Ocean Grove building), while Sadie reports that her residence, also owned and mortgage-free, was around the corner on Broadway Street (that is, the Orchard Hotel).

Whatever the partnership agreement, the discord surfaced in prominent fashion. In November of 1923, Tom displayed his ability to stand up to the formidable Sadie when he filed a feisty public notice

² See Max Yeh’s article on the meal tickets, “Tom Ying’s Meal Tickets — Chinese Translated.” <http://hillsborohistory.blogspot.com/2011/03/tom-yings-meal-ticketschinese.html>

with the county. In this notice he claims to own the whole building (Sierra County Miscellaneous Records, D-47):

I, Tom Ying hereby notify any and all persons to whom this may concern that I am the owner of those certain parcels ... described as Lots Nos. 3 and 4 [sic, 2 and 3] in Block 24 in the townsite of Hillsboro, Sierra County, New Mexico, as shown by the plat thereof on file in the office of the county clerk

I further notify all persons that Sadie Orchard makes claim to said Lots and improvements but that said claim is unlawful and unjust

Notice is hereby further given that any person attempting to buy or lease or in any manner to obtain any interest in said property from the said Sadie Orchard or any of her agents does so at their own risk as I am the only person who can ... make any contract which will be binding concerning said property.

I give this notice to all in order that no one may be deceived by the said Sadie Orchard or any of her agents as to whom is the true owner.

This is the mark of a fearless businessman! It doesn't tell us what the agreement was, but Sadie doesn't dispute the claim. My preference is to not speculate. Indeed, Tom continued to run his restaurant in this building for a number of years, and to live in it until his death in 1959.³ However, it must be noted that Sadie continued to pay half the taxes until at least 1939.

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Ad for the Tom Ying Restaurant in the *Sierra County Advocate*, 1920.

In Hillsboro Tom Ying became an extremely successful entrepreneur with his restaurant. His reputation seems to have spread by word of mouth, since he rarely advertised in the newspaper. Two of his rare ads appeared in the *Sierra County Advocate* of November 26, 1920 and in the *Hillsboro News* of January 21, 1932.



Ad for the Tom Ying Restaurant in the *Hillsboro News*, 1932.

³ Curiously, in a 1983 article in the *Carlsbad Current-Argus*, Michael Taylor (who lived in Hillsboro in the 1930s) reports that Ying closed his restaurant around 1932: "I knew something of Tom because my boss, Jacob H. Crosby, and I opened a café [the Tip Top, in 1931] that put him out of business. Tom ... charged the same price, 75 cents, for each meal, whether hot cakes for breakfast or steak for supper. Our Tip Top had varying prices but most full meals went for 40 cents, pie and coffee included. Tom came to the Tip Top soon after we opened and took careful note of our arrangements and of the menu and prices chalked on the blackboard beside our front door. He accepted our offer of pie and coffee, smiled a good deal, but said nothing. He went on charging 75 cents a meal. We soon had all his customers, with the exception of Mr. Mister." (Michael Taylor, "Sadie, Tom, and Mister Mister," *Carlsbad Current-Argus* [September 2, 1983], p. 18.) Taylor's account of a permanent closing of Ying's restaurant in the early 1930s, however, does not square with other facts that we know: for example, Tom's continuing restaurant business is pretty clearly documented by (1) his receipt for being paid \$9.15 for meals at the August 1935 term of the Sierra Co. District Court and (2) the 1940 Census listing of him as proprietor of a café.

It appears that Tom Ying devoted his life to his restaurant and squirreled away his profits in order to invest in the improvement of the facilities. For example, in the late 1920s he built a unique 25-foot tall water tower to provide water by gravity feed into his kitchen. The first photo below shows the tower in the sad condition in which it was in 2016; the second shows it after restoration by the Hillsboro Historical Society as part of the renewal of the Black Range Museum. Nowhere will you find another round adobe water tower like this, except perhaps in southern China.



Water tower constructed by Tom Ying behind his restaurant in what is now the Black Range Museum, before and after restoration. Photos by the author.



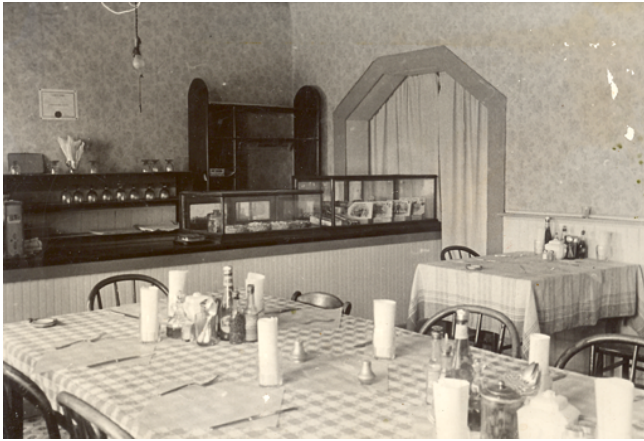
The kitchen in Tom Ying's restaurant, showing the stove and innovative hot water system. Photo by the author.



Tom Ying's restaurant, c. 1930. Photo Black Range Museum.

In Ying’s former kitchen is an equally innovative use of the water from his tower. In the photo at left, we see Tom’s big wood-burning cookstove. And to the left of it is the water tank into which the water from the tower fed. You can see two disconnected pipes on the right side of this water tank. Those two pipes had once been connected directly to tubing within the stove. In this way, via thermal cycling, he could send hot water back to the tank and on for use in his kitchen sink.

The exterior of Tom Ying’s restaurant was quite ordinary, as seen in the photo above right, looking west up Carro Lane. Since we see the water tower in back, we know that the photo was taken after its construction in the late 1920s. The sign above the main entry on the right says simply “Restaurant.”



In contrast to the drab and plain exterior, however, the photo at left, also taken about 1930, shows the dining room inside. This room is clean, well-tended, and much more inviting, befitting the best place in town to get a good meal at the time. It is noteworthy that many of the things visible in this photo are preserved in the Black Range Museum’s collection, as well as a number of other artifacts from Ying’s life — including a jug hand-painted by him in a traditional Chinese style. (Ying’s dining room now serves as the museum gift shop.)

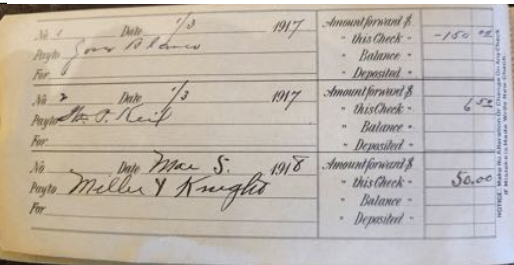
The restaurant dining room, c. 1930, now the museum gift shop. Photo Black Range Museum.



(Left to right) Museum shelves with items from Ying’s restaurant kitchen and dining room; a jug hand-painted by Ying; and a display case of items belonging to Ying, Black Range Museum. Photos Joe Britton.



The refrigeration unit purchased by Ying in 1931. Photo Joe Britton.



Ying's checkbook, showing the record of the only three checks he wrote. Black Range Museum.

Once more at the outset of the Great Depression, Ying's modernizing proclivity was elegantly on display when in 1931 he plunked down the enormous sum of \$600 (nearly \$12,000 in today's dollars) to buy the first electric refrigeration unit in Sierra County. This imposing six-foot tall refrigerator, equipped with a modern "Kelvinator Refrigeration Unit," was purchased from a dealership in El Paso.⁴ Jay Jackson's 1995 article tells the story of the salesman Hudson Murrell, who described his dealing with Tom: "He didn't pay a dime until we had it running. Then he went to the back porch, picked up a board and pulled out \$600." If Tom is the one who lost his savings in the 1895 Lake Valley fire, it seems he didn't heed the lesson. On the other hand, many banks closed during that depression, so what did he have to lose?

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Tom Ying also made investments beyond his restaurant business. In fact, he opened a checking account with Sierra County Bank in Hillsboro, apparently back in 1917. And in January of that year he wrote a check for \$150 to José and Celsa Blanco for a property one block north of Main Street at the east base of Schoolhouse Hill (Sierra County Warranty Deed F-443, 1/3/1917). The Black Range Museum has his sparsely used checkbook, and we see that the check to the Blancos was one of only three checks he wrote. It seems that he really did not trust banks.

Much later, Ying acquired another property at the far west end of Elenora Street (Lots 4 and 5 of Block 1 in Tract 73). This acquisition requires greater explanation. Fred Mister was the last owner of the Lake Valley-Hillsboro-Kingston stage line, which he bought from J. W. and Sadie Orchard in 1902. Michael Taylor, in his memoir about Hillsboro in the 1930s, tells us that Ying was devoted to Mr. Mister and that Mister in turn "was Tom Ying's friend, adviser, and daily customer" (p. 14). Mister regularly hosted guests at Ying's restaurant, as described in the *Deming Headlight* on June 5, 1925, which reported that "Mr. Fred W. Mister ... entertained a number of friends at a turkey dinner at Tom Ying's Restaurant on Sunday, May 24th." (Mister and Ying also apparently vied good-naturedly for the prize of "oldest old-timer" at a competition in Deming in 1937, as reported in the *Deming Headlight* on July 22 of that year.) As a daily customer, Mister apparently ran up a hefty bill with Ying, which resulted in the Elenora Street property going to Ying on Mister's death – although another friend, George A. Miller had to intercede to make this happen (quit claim document in the HHS digital archive). Ying paid taxes on the property from at least 1942 to 1946, but we don't know what later happened to the two lots.

Curiously, at about the same time Ying became lax in paying the taxes on his own restaurant. And the result of this carelessness, whether intentional or not, is that his next-door neighbor and long-time good friend, Marie Disinger took over ownership in 1952 by paying the 1948 tax of \$4.55.

In the 1940 Census Tom acknowledges having "income from other sources" than his restaurant. In addition to his early checking account with Sierra County Bank, we have a 1931 document attesting to

⁴ An account of the purchase of the refrigerator, Hudson Murrell the salesman, and a description of the apparatus, is contained in the Bob Barnes' blog [blackrange.org](http://www.blackrange.org). The article was also reproduced in the *GZP* of February 2018. <http://www.blackrange.org/the-human-history-of-the/towns-of-the-black-range/hillsboro/hillsboro-photo-album/tom-yings-refrigerator.html>

his having an account with National Mutual Savings & Loan of Salt Lake City. An indication of a local investment is that also in 1931 he received and cashed a check for \$10 from Animas Consolidated Mines Company.

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Presented earlier were two images of a young Chinese male who might have been Tom Ying. We have very few other photos of Tom, just three for certain in the HHS archive, all taken in Hillsboro. Maybe he didn't like to have his picture taken. But to the left is a photo definitely of Tom, sitting with a friend to his left on Main Street. The date is unknown, but it may have been close to Michael Taylor's 1930s description of Tom as "a mild little man, brown and wrinkled, with old-fashioned Ben Franklin spectacles [sic] and streaky gray hair" (p. 13).

Then there is another photo (below left) of the backside of an elderly Tom chopping firewood in the backyard of his restaurant building. Over his left shoulder you can see his outhouse, a two-seater with a plank wall in the middle and with separate doors to assure some privacy.



And finally we have the shaky, unfocused snapshot of Tom (above right), surrounded by a group of old-timer Hillsboro friends. This photo was supposedly taken in 1954, when he would have been approaching ninety, just a few years before his death.

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We know that Tom Ying died in St. Ann's Hospital in Truth or Consequences on September 14, 1959, but we don't know when he was admitted to that facility. We also don't know when he closed up his restaurant, but it appears that he lived there until the very end. And he was apparently the last resident of the building before Lydia Key opened it as the Black Range Museum just a year and a half after his death. After Key came to Hillsboro in 1952, she apparently befriended Tom. In a reminiscence published in the *Albuquerque Journal* on August 26, 1986, Key remarked, "One real interesting person here was Tom Ying ... The first Christmas I was here I brought Tom Ying a Christmas dinner. He was just sitting by the stove waiting to die. He claimed he was 116. I don't think he was 100."

In spite of the murkiness of information about Tom Ying's life, we have been able to construct a just biography of this man. And we have been able to do so without relying upon the uninformed stories passed along as history. Taylor, for instance, generally provides reliable information, even though writing decades after his Hillsboro experiences. Yet he relies on reports of others to state that Ying "had lived many years in San Francisco before coming to New Mexico" (p. 13). The story is not true, though Tom probably entered the U.S. through San Francisco and he visited there in later years.

Other stories tell of Ying’s affection for opium and alcohol. A delightful example is again provided by Taylor, regarding Ying’s tradition for the Chinese New Year (p. 14):

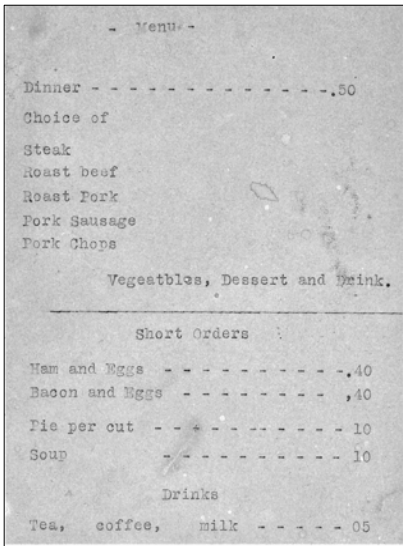
It so happened on the day of our opening [of the Tip Top Restaurant in 1931] that Tom Ying was undergoing what I learned was an annual ritual – he got his hair cut and he got drunk Tom reeled into our place around ten in the morning, all smiles and giggles, and we gave him pie and coffee on the house and we were always friends thereafter. A year later Tom closed his restaurant ... and took off for Canton, China. Some folks said he took his coffin with him but Mr. Mister said that was all bosh.

To discover the facts and eliminate the bosh is not easy. The “reeling in” was witnessed by Taylor. The “annual ritual” was reported by others, likely an embellishment. If Tom did close his restaurant in 1932, it was likely only temporarily to make one of his trips to the West Coast. It is not at all likely that Tom traveled to China that year (with or without a coffin), since the still-active Chinese Exclusion Act would have prevented his returning to the U.S.

Some of the other stories can be readily rejected. One flagrant example is that Tom cooked in Sadie’s hotel for the crowds drawn to the 1899 Albert Fountain murder trial in Hillsboro. The historical record supports neither the existence of Sadie’s hotel nor Tom’s Hillsboro presence at that time.

Other stories that seem fanciful are less clearly bosh. Tom’s age, for instance. Although our research shows important gaps in the historical facts, we are comfortable in suggesting that he must have been in his early nineties when he died. It is highly unlikely that he reached 116 years of age as suggested by Cushman and others, including Tom himself!

There are published second-hand reports extolling Ying’s elaborate gourmet meals. Others say he prepared wonderful Chinese food. Both claims are doubtful. Have a look at Tom’s only known menu (at left, which is on display in the Black Range Museum). Notice the price of .50, which dates this menu sometime before 1932, when Taylor reported that meals at Ying’s restaurant were .75 – regardless of which meal of the day it was. This is good ol’ miner and cowboy food, strong on meat, and typical of an American café in the 1930s, what was advertised by Tom in the *Hillsboro News* as “Good Eats – Regular Meals.” This is not gourmet food. It is not Chinese food. But as Lonnie Rubio, Sr. noted for a 1987 Hillsboro High School reunion, in Tom’s restaurant “you could get one of the best cooked meals ever, a large steak served on a platter loaded with potatoes and many vegetables.”

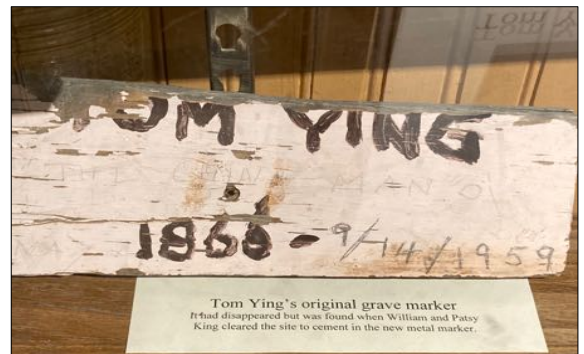


Menu from Ying’s restaurant, prior to 1931, showing dinner at 50 cents. Black Range Museum.

Such historical uncertainties remind us again of the difficulties of relying on almost all reports about Tom Ying,

including such a seemingly reliable source as his obituary presented at the beginning of this article.

What we do know with certainty, however, is that Tom Ying became one of Sierra County’s distinguished persons, admired and respected by many of his fellow citizens. This courageous Chinese immigrant, this loyal American, endured and prospered, undaunted by the racism that enveloped him.



The original marker for Ying’s grave in the Hillsboro Cemetery, now in the display case at the Black Range Museum, with the dates “1866 – 9/14/1959.” It was found by William and Patsy King who replaced it with a metal marker. Photo Joe Britton.

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