

Atlas helped put Chinatown on the map



THEN: The Seattle Times photographed a drum major leading the funeral parade for Dong On Long through Seattle's Chinatown, but the picture was not used in its May 12, 1941, report on the parade



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ON MONDAY May 12, 1941, a brass band leading at least three floats moved from Maynard Avenue at Jackson Street into Chinatown with a parade honoring Dong On Long, the Chinese Benevolent Association president who'd recently died. Dong, who had lived and worked in the neighborhood for more than half a century, was famed for his wisdom as an arbitrator in what The Seattle Times called "the Chinese colony."

Here in front of the Atlas Theatre, the first float is adorned with a wreath-framed portrait of the beloved citizen.

When the Atlas opened in 1918, owner Seisabura Mukai advertised it as "the finest in the south district . . . Large capacity, clean and cozy, catering a first class patronage."

By early in 1942, Mukai learned that he would be interned with other Japanese citizens and Japanese Americans, so he leased his Atlas to Burrell C. Johnson, who kept it going by showing second-run double features and keeping it open all night. That December, Johnson was booked for operating a crowded fire hazard. On Jan. 3, 1944, the police routed "scores" of sleepers from the Atlas at 5 in the morning. The Times reported that 20 "were held for investigation of their draft status."

James Matsuo, president of the neighborhood community council, advised the city in 1950 that the Atlas created an "atmosphere" that promoted crime, and that its license should not be renewed. The police described "trouble with pickpockets, some strong arm robberies . . . and prostitutes," Johnson lamented. "It's a difficult theater to run . . . I've been trying to do the best I can." He then remodeled the Atlas with new seats, lighting and candy bar. That summer, during the district's Seacair carnival, the Atlas showed films with all Filipino and Chinese casts. 📺

NOW: The low-rise Atlas Theatre, mid-block on the east side of Maynard Avenue between Jackson and King streets, has been redeveloped with a bright multistory structure. Much else survives, including, on the right, the brick Atlas Hotel building at the north-east corner with King Street