

# Museum News: The Chinese in Terrell County, part 1

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## Terrell County Memorial Museum

At one time in its history Sanderson was host to huge numbers of Chinese workers. With the coming of the railroad in 1882, three to eight thousand Chinese were at work locally, hand grading the roadbed for the new tracks.

Using picks and shovels and copious supplies of black powder, they scraped and blasted their way west from El Paso. Gifted at demolition and possessing a strong work ethic, these men moved millions of tons of earth and rocks to make way for progress in West Texas.

When the rail crews met at the edge of the Pecos River, a silver spike was driven on January 12, 1883, to commemorate the superhuman effort, both by the Chinese, known as "Celestials," and the mostly white, Irish crews coming from the east.

For the next forty years, the Chinese maintained a presence in Terrell County, until at long last the remaining few died out, went back to China or moved away.

The Chinese came to the US in large numbers at the end of the Civil War to work on the Central Pacific Railroad as it built the first transcontinental rail route through the American Great Plains, the Rocky Mountains and the Sierra Nevadas. There were plenty of "Anglos" to do the work, but, most able-bodied white men were out in the west looking for gold and silver in an effort to get rich quick. There was no one to do the menial jobs, and so, an industry was born.

In many cases, the Chinese came here to work as indentured servants, going into volunteer slavery because they had no money to pay for passage. At the end of seven years their term of "slavery" was up, their contract completed, and if they were lucky they had their freedom.

There was also a significant number who were "Shanghaied," kidnapped from their homeland and sold into virtual slavery to the highest bidder. Enduring the most horrible conditions on the slave ships, the mortality rate was tremendous (15 to 40%,) harkening back to Atlantic slave ship days. There was little redemption for these poor men, and some were condemned to a life of servitude under the most abject conditions.

Wave after wave of émigrés poured into California, only to be segregated into their own communities and treated as animals. But, there was a big difference between the Chinese and black slaves...the Chinese received wages for their work. In many cases they completed their contracts and got their freedom, or purchased it. And though there were cases of abuse and kidnapping, for the most part the Chinese came voluntarily, even though the social and working conditions were harsh. They soon became a valuable commodity for the railroad.

In the 1870s, the men who financed the Central Pacific decided to build a southern route across the US, an all-weather route that would not be threatened by harsh winter weather. The Chinese were hired to work east from the California end.

Life for the Chinese was grueling and difficult, but tolerable. They worked six days a week, twelve hours a day, in gangs of about 55, with a white foreman. They took Sunday off to mend and wash their clothes and pass the time smoking and gambling. Their daily apparel was strange to white men, consisting of blousy blue cotton pants and shirts, huge conical straw hats, and with their delicate hands hidden in billowing sleeves.

While the Irish drank water all day, which sometimes caused illness, the Chinese drank lukewarm tea, which stood in forty and fifty-gallon barrels by the roadbed. The barrels were constantly swapped for full ones by a cook's attendant, balancing two repurposed powder barrels suspended from a bamboo pole over his shoulder.



*Chinese workers and their white bosses, grading new roadbed.*

When the day was done, the Irish would immediately eat heavy meals of meat, potatoes, beans, bread and butter. The Chinese, however, would take time to bathe and put on fresh clothes, then sit down to a meal cooked by their own cooks, consisting of a varied mix of exotic foods such as dried oysters, abalone, cuttlefish, dried bamboo sprouts, dried mushrooms, five kinds of vegetables, pork, poultry, vermicelli, rice, salted cabbage, dried seaweed, sweet rice crackers, sugar, four kinds of dried fruit, Chinese bacon, peanut oil and tea. On the whole, this diet was lighter and more nutritious than the Irish fare.