

Museum News: The Chinese in Terrell County, part 2

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Terrell County Memorial Museum

After supper, the Chinese would sit around their campfires humming songs or playing spirited games of fan-tan, a traditional Chinese gambling game. Often they would make wild bets and have loud arguments over the progress of the game, but the anger never spilled over into the rest of the camp.

On Saturday nights the Chinese would smoke opium from their odd pipes. The opium apparatus consisted of a large pipe, often over 18" in length, with a removable bowl that plugged into the top side of the tube. The raw opium was cooked into a taffy-like mass and spread in the bowl, which had a small hole in the top to allow air to enter. The bowl was plugged into the pipe and heated over a special lamp.

As the opium bubbled into a blue smoke, the smoker inhaled and drifted away into a stupor. The railroad decided that for men who led such a hard and dangerous life, they deserved their own kind of "recreation."

Religion was an important aspect of Chinese life and they insisted on having "joss" houses available to them. A joss house was a small temple or shrine where they could worship their household gods, usually three small statues. There was also an element of ancestor worship and veneration of those who had passed. "Joss sticks" were burned to honor the dead and speed prayers to heaven, and "joss money," or "ghost money" was burned to give the deceased a comfortable existence in the afterlife.

Using information observed during the Central Pacific construction days in the 1860s, archeologists and anthropologists today can infer that the same behaviors occurred during construction in Terrell County just twenty years later.

All along the original route, archeologists have found the remains of worker camps, one just a few miles from Sanderson. Shards of rice bowls, bottles, clay opium pipes, opium tins, snuff boxes and cast-off kitchen implements such as woks, cutlery and spoons have been found in great quantity. The longer a crew stayed in one spot, the more detritus was deposited.

After construction was finished, the Chinese were absorbed into maintenance crews to take care of what they had just built. Also, as the railroad was being built and because of tight deadlines, the line was forced to snake its way through the desert, skirting deep arroyos and canyons by going up or downstream to shallower crossings to avoid building bridges or trestles. That also allowed the railroad to gain even more public land, since they received 16 square miles of property on either side of the route as an inducement to build.

After the deadlines were met, crews were needed to straighten the line and cut off the extra miles. The building of the 1892 Pecos River Bridge cut 20 miles from the route.

The Chinese were also employed by locals for road building projects. Rancher Charles Downie hired a crew of Chinese and Italian Piedmontese stone masons to build the road over Big Hill, north of Sanderson. That stonework is still in place and appears to be as sound as the day it was built.

And in Sanderson, the new depot restaurant, known as the "Beanery," was run by the Chinese for twenty years. Their culinary skill made the Beanery a very popular place to eat.

The 1900 Pecos County census lists eight Chinese living in Sanderson, all employees of the Terrell Hotel. By 1910, only one Chinese was listed on the census. Other Chinese who were living here in that period but missed the census were Sam Lee, Sam Sing, Bob Lum, brothers Gin Wo and Gin Sing, and Lee Quong, all employees of the Terrell Hotel. In the 1920 census the last two Chinese men were recorded in Terrell County. Existence must have been lonely for the Chinese, as no Chinese women were ever recorded as living here.



Pick and shovel work

Sanderson folks loved the Chinese, who were friendly and had a keen sense of humor. They spoke good English, but, would use the language barrier in their humor. One man was drawn to the hotel dining room by the delicious smell of roasted meat. He had a plate and loved it. He had another, and when he was full, he pointed to the serving dish and asked, "Quack-quack?" The Chinese cook shook his head, no, and said, "Bow-wow."

One young cowboy loved the baked goods created by the Chinese cook at the hotel. Passing by the kitchen window one day, the cowboy found the cook making bread. Fascinated, he watched as the cook kneaded and twisted the dough, thoroughly working it to the right consistency. Then, finding the dough a little too dry, the Chinese moistened it by squirting water on it from his mouth. The young cowboy never ate the hotel bread again!

Mr. Sam Sing had only one dessert on the menu, rice pudding. If patrons said that it tasted old, Mr. Sing replied, "Okay, I bring tomorrow."

In another story, as told by Mr. Charles Merrill, superintendent of the T&NO, an engineer asked, "Say, Wong, what do you make these apple pies out of?" Mr. Wong replied in pidgen English, "You likee apple pie? I haveee good recipee — sometime I use banana, pear, peach, strawberry, apricot, melon — but, the bestee apple pie made out of apple."