



Museum News

The Chinese in Terrell County



Photo: cpr.org

Chinese workers and their white bosses, grading new roadbed.

Although you wouldn't know it now, at one time in its history Sanderson was host to huge numbers of Chinese workers.

With the coming of the railroad in 1882, three thousand, and at times, up to eight thousand Chinese workers (derogatively called "coolies,") 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 on the last leg of the new transcontinental rail line. 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.

Camping out all along the way, today there is still evidence of their presence in the rock circles and exotic dump grounds of

Chinese cultural objects along the route.

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 Irish and mostly white 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 to larger places.

The Chinese first came to the US at the end of the Civil War, to work on the Central Pacific Railroad, parent of the Southern Pacific, as it built the first transcontinental rail route through the American Great Plains, the Rocky Mountains and the Sierra Nevadas.



Pick and shovel work

There were plenty of "Anglos" to do the work, but, like the crew shortages in the oil fields today, most able-bodied 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, in effect, 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 "Shanghai'd," 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 for a price. And though there were many cases recorded 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 owners of 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, having proved themselves on the middle route, were hired on to work east on the southern route, 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, usually Irish. 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, when not working, 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.

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, these were lighter and



Decorated rice bowl

Photo: cprrr.org

more nutritious meals than the Irish ate.

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 the Chinese, 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.

By fulfilling their cultural, spiritual and social needs, life was made bearable for the homesick Chinese, who were not allowed to bring their wives and families to this country.

Using information observed during the

Central Pacific construction days in the 1860s, archeologists and sociologists 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 many worker camps, one just a few miles from Sander-son. 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.

But what happened when the silver spike was driven and the job was done? What became of the three thousand Chinese workers, who, in most cases, did not return to the Orient?

For the most part, the Chinese were absorbed into maintenance crews, who had to take care of what they had just built. Also, as the railroad was being built and because of tight deadlines, the line snaked 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 re-



Legislation such as the Chinese Exclusion Act stopped Chinese immigration to the US in 1882.

ceived 16 square miles of property on either side of the line as an inducement to build.

After the deadlines were met, bridge 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.

And, the left-over Chinese crews were also employed by locals for road building projects. Charles Downie hired a crew of Chinese laborers 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 was designated a meal stop because diner service had not been implemented on the railroad. Chinese were the first to run the depot restaurant known as the "Beanery." Excellent cooks, they 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. Juong Mar Lei, 31, was the proprietor of the hotel and had been in the US since 1880. He could speak, read and write English and he was married. His waiters were Tong Mar, 41; Wing Mar Turn, 32; Ling Mar, 42, and How Hon, 31. There were two cooks, Sam Kee, 41, and War Mar Mun, 33. Jim Lu, 58, was listed as a servant. Only two of the gentlemen could not read or write English, but they all spoke English. They all immigrated to the US in 1878 and 1880, except for Mr. Lu, who came as a 10-year-old in 1861.

By 1910, only one Chinese was listed on the census, Yung Jee, who was born in China in 1860 and had immigrated to the US in 1870. 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 and the boarding house and restaurant in the adobe building which was an annex just north of the hotel.



Bob Lum

Photo: Terrell County Memorial Museum

In the 1920 census two Chinese men were recorded in Terrell County: Chien Wee, 30, born in 1890 in China and Sam Yen Yoong, 43, born in China in 1877.

Existence must have been lonely for the Chinese, as no Chinese women were ever recorded as living here.

Sanderson folks loved the Chinese. The Chinese were a likable lot, with a keen sense of humor. They spoke good English, but, often, would use the language barrier to their advantage.

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 story is told of a young cowboy who was enamored of the baked goods created by the Chinese cook at the hotel. Passing by the kitchen window one day, the cowboy spied the cook as he was making bread. Fascinated by the process, the cowboy watched as the cook kneaded and twisted the bread dough, thoroughly working it to the right consistency. Then, to the horror of the cowboy, the Chinese moistened the dough by squirting water from his mouth. It is said that the young cowboy never partook of the bread at the hotel again!

Mr. Sam Sing is said to have had only one dessert on the menu, rice pudding. If patrons said that it tasted old, Mr. Sing replied that he would bring it back the next day.

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 broken English, "You likee apple pie? I haveee good recipee — sometime I use banana, pear, peach, strawberry, apricot, melon — but, the bestee apple pie is made out of apple."



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