

“The Chinamen were as steady, hardworking set of men as could be found.”

John Gillis, “Tunnels of the Pacific Railroad”, 1870

The job of building the western portion of the transcontinental railroad and across the Sierra went to the Chinese workers who made up 80% or more of the Central Pacific’s workforce.

The Chinese workers were courageous. They’d left China with big hopes but uncertain futures going to a completely alien land, America. Building the railroad they faced discomfort, danger, and death but they built the railroad which tied California to the rest of the country enabling commerce, immigration, and the development of the West. The railroad also brought the world to California as products could be imported to California and then sent to the rest of the country and vice versa.

Once construction started on the Transcontinental Railroad there was not enough labor. Whites wanted to work for themselves or for higher pay in the mines. A call for 5,000 laborers only produced a few hundred. Charles Crocker, one of the Big 4 who ran the railroad, suggested Chinese laborers. That was greeted with laughter and James Strobridge, construction superintendent was against the idea.

The Chinese were small in stature. Each rail weighed 532 lbs. and was 24 feet long. How could the Chinese ever lay those rails? Crocker countered saying, “Did they not build the Chinese wall, the biggest piece of masonry in the world?”

Chinese endured frostbite, avalanche, accident, pneumonia, explosion, rock slide, disease, and cold, continual cold in winter. The Chinese lived in un-insulated buildings and during winter they sometimes went weeks without seeing the sun as they traveled from their camps to the work through snow tunnels. The winter of 1866-67 had one of the highest snowfalls on record: 40 feet. There were a total of 44 storms that winter with one multi-day storm dropping 10 feet of snow. One avalanche took away a cabin filled with Chinese workers whose remains

were not found until spring. There was so much snow the snow tunnel leading to Tunnel 6 had to be lengthened by fifty feet so the workers could still have access. The lowest temperature recorded that winter was 5.5 degrees. The summer heat of the Nevada and Utah deserts must also have been grueling.

The work was long and hard, done all by hand and black powder explosives. Rocks were moved using baskets and small carts. The work went on 10-12 hours a day six days a week. In the tunnels they worked by candle and lantern light. The air was filled with rock dust and black powder residue.

For the work, the danger and the discomfort, the Chinese earned \$28, then \$30, and finally \$35 a month, a third less than whites who also had their board covered by the railroad.

Chinese labor was supplied to the railroad by labor contractors. The Chinese worked in gangs ranging up to fifty individuals. Each gang had a Chinese foreman who organized the gang and

received and distributed the pay. Money was withheld to pay the gang’s cook and buy food. Although they were paid less, there was an advantage. The Chinese had much better diets and were the most civilized and healthy of the railroad workers. The white workers had boiled food, beef and potatoes monotonously.

The Chinese diets were rich and varied. They ate “Dried oysters, dried cuttle-fish, dried-fish, sweet rice crackers, dried bamboo sprouts, salted cabbage, Chinese sugar (like sorghum sugar) four kinds of dried fruits, five kinds of desiccated vegetables, vermicelli, dried sea-weed, Chinese bacon



cut up into salt cutlets, dried meat of the abalone shell, pea-nut oil, dried mushrooms, tea, and rice. They also buy pork of [sic] the butcher, and on the holidays they eat poultry.” (*California for Travelers and Settlers*, 1873.)

Foodstuffs were purchased by the railroad for resale to work gangs and supplied from mobile stores in rail cars at track end. Chinese merchants also catered to workers selling imported goods, rice, dried fish, tea, opium, silk, and herbal medicines as well as table ware and storage vessels.

The Chinese were better off than the white workers in more than their diets. Their cooks heated water for tea which the Chinese drank instead of the local water. We can only imagine the sanitary habits of thousands of men at work on the line and the effect on local water. The cooks also heated water so the Chinese workers could bathe regularly.

After work the Chinese could bathe, change clothes, gamble, and enjoy opium or liquor.

“The drillers are all Chinamen, and most excellent hands they make, as will be seen when I state that a gang of three can drill three holes of one and a quarter inches in diameter and two and a half feet deep in twelve hours.”

*Sacramento Union*, April 22, 1867

They were a great army laying siege to Nature in her strongest citadel. The rugged mountains looked like stupendous ant-hills. They swarmed with Celestials, shoveling, wheeling, carting, drilling and blasting rocks and earth, ... from under immense basket-hats, like umbrellas....After a little experience the [Chinese] were quite as efficient and far less troublesome [than the Irish].  
*Beyond the Mississippi*, 1869 and the *N.Y. Tribune*

If the work and living conditions were not bad enough, the Chinese were subject to being waylaid after leaving the railroad during time off. The *Sacramento Union* reported in December 15, 1866, that “the practice of robbing Chinamen is said to be a very frequent occurrence..., as scarcely a week passes without some of them being attacked beaten, and plundered.” Other articles report, “Two Chinamen were shot...” (12/3/66 *Sacramento Union*), Chinese robbed, doors kicked in, women abused, men beaten, houses burned, etc.



Just how many Chinese died during the building of the railroad is an open question argued over by railroad aficionados and historians. The problem in ascertaining the numbers is lack of record keeping and even contemporary reports cannot be relied upon. The following article gives us some idea though,

“Bones of Defunct Chinamen – The Central Pacific freight train last evening brought to the city the bones of about fifty defunct Chinamen who died from disease or were killed by accident while working on the line of the Central Pacific Railroad...”

*Sacramento Union*, June 30, 1871



We slept at the Lake House; and spent the next day with the surveyors among the precipitous granite ledges, and visiting Lake Angela, a lovely little mountain gem. It was like picnicking at the North Pole; for snow lined higher ravines and icicles hung from the water-tanks on the stage-road. Here during the previous winter, two laborers were engulfed by a snow-slide. Seeing it approach they stepped behind a tall rock; but it buried them fifty feet deep. In spring their bodies were found standing upright, with shovels in their hands.

*Beyond the Mississippi*, 1869