

The Donner Summit

Heirloom



History and stories of the Donner Summit Historical Society and the most historically significant square mile in California.

October, 2023 issue #182

Summit Camp Revisited



Left: view of Summit Camp from the south, part way up Donner Pk. The picture is #116 by Alfred A. Hart about 1868. The road in the foreground is the Dutch Flat Donner Lake Wagon Rd., later the Lincoln Highway and today, a trail in the foreground of the picture on the right. The view to the right was taken in 2015 from about the same place as the one on the left.

We last visited Summit Camp, the longest lasting and largest of the Chinese railroad workers' camps on the Central Pacific, in our August, '16 [Heirloom](#). That "visit" was one small part of our research into the Chinese railroad workers on Donner Summit (see our [Heirloom](#) article indices on each [Heirloom](#) page of our website, donnersummithistoricalsociety.org, for the many stories of Chinese workers). During that research into the work and lives of the railroad workers we'd also learned of the location of Summit Camp and so we went out looking. Because the Donner Summit Histori-

cal Society's Mobile Historical Research Team (MHRT) is tenacious, we found a couple of Chinese railroad workers campsites and spent some time at the Summit Camp site. We even returned with Kayle, a cadaver dog (see our June and August '18 [Heirlooms](#)). Further research said that the site had also been visited by archeologists who had done surface collecting of artifacts in 1983 and 1984 (with return visits in 2015 and 2016 to reconcile the map made during the first visit) and in 1963. The archeologists removed almost all the artifacts from the Summit Camp site as well as around the Central Shaft of Tunnel 6. The visits produced



FIGURE 1. Seven tunnels (noted by arrows) were excavated by Chinese railroad workers, all within two miles of Summit Camp. (Map adapted from Signor [1985:114–115] by R. S. Baxter, 2008.)

from the "View from Summit Camp" R. Scott Baxter and Rebecca Allen 2015 *Historical Archaeology* 49(1):35-45

two collections, Chace and Evans (1963) and Costello (1983-4). The archeologists limited themselves to surface collecting and no actual archeological digs because the surface is granite and impenetrable.

Leading up to publishing our 2016 *Heirloom* articles we looked for the collections but it was not until 2023 when we were working with the 1882 Foundation which is aiming at getting landmark status for Tunnel 6 and recognition of the Chinese railroad workers, that we found out that the collections had ended up with the Chinese Historical Society of Southern California. Smelling a story there and wanting to satisfy ourselves and curious readers, our MHRT hopped on a plane and headed for Los Angeles.

The Transcontinental Railroad was a mammoth undertaking. The western portion, built by the Central Pacific (CPRR), was built primarily by Chinese workers. There were Chinese worker camps all along the Central Pacific's route. An 1867 report from the Federal Railroad Inspectors said, "These camps are generally built about one mile apart and consist of store houses, power houses, blacksmith shops, kitchen, eating and sleeping rooms, and stables for mules, horses and oxen. These, with the small buildings erected by the Chinese laborers for their own use, make quite a village [see page 1]." As work moved east the camps were abandoned and new ones were built further along the line. Since the camps were temporary there was not much in the way of permanent infrastructure leaving only scattered artifacts, mostly broken pottery and odd bits of metal.

Summit Camp at the top of Donner Pass, was different though. It was in use for four years, from 1865 to 1869 during the construction of Tunnel 6. In "The View from Summit Camp" by R. Scott Baxter in *Historical Archaeology* (2015), during their stay on Donner Summit the Chinese built "a small town that included many aspects of traditional Chinese culture. The laborers transformed the land they built and lived in." It's the remnants of that culture that 20th Century archeologists har-



Alfred A. Hart #196 "Shaft House of Summit Tunnel ca. 1868. The building back, center, right, housed the donkey engine and the top of the central shaft of Tunnel 6. The pond is about where the Donner Summit Hub's parking lot is today.

vested from the summit, examples of which we'll see here later on in this issue of the Heirloom. Sometime after the completion of the railroad in 1869 Summit Camp was abandoned in favor of Summit Station that housed permanent workers and some commercial concerns along with the Summit Hotel. (See below. The white building on the left was the Summit Hotel.)

Besides being in use for longer than most work camps and so requiring more substantial construction, there was also the climate to consider in the building of Summit Camp. When Summit Camp was occupied an average of 34 feet of snow* fell each winter on Donner Summit. The wind piles the snow into high drifts, sometimes forty feet deep. Avalanches can sweep down the slopes bringing danger but also more snow. To withstand the conditions the quarters for Chinese workers had to be substantial and there are a number of old photographs that attest to that such as the photographs here.

In winter most of the Chinese railroad workers were sent further up the line leaving only the tunnel workers and their support at the summit but that must have been a substantial number of people and winter must have been miserable for all of them. Some of Summit Camp's inhabitants did not see the sun for months at a time as they traveled from their quarters through snow tunnels to the work faces in the tunnels. In "Tunnels of the Pacific Railroad," a paper given before the American Society of Engineers by the CPRR engineer John Gillis in 1870, he described conditions. "The Chinese lived under the snow. Chimneys went up through the snow along with air shafts. Tunnels went from location to location. Storerooms

and blacksmith shops were dug into the snow." It was cold and water must have been continually dripping from the snow caves and tunnel ceilings. The winter of 1866 was particularly bad; there were forty-four snowstorms. the Dutch Flat Enquirer backed that up on January 26, 1867, saying, "We are now in the midst of one of the most severe winters we have experienced. Tunnel portals were buried, Chinese encampments snowed under."

To deal with the snow the workers dug snow tunnels through



Carleton Watkins Summit Station about 1875

which they traveled to and from work. The tunnels ranged from fifty to 200 feet long and included excavated rooms. There were windows dug in the sides of some so that the tunnel debris and continually excavated snow could be defenestrated.* The tunnels had to be continually maintained because the snow roofs would sag and snow would melt from the

*Today, according to the Central Sierra Snow Lab in Soda Springs, on Donner Summit, the average annual snowfall is 30 feet, a few feet less than in earlier years.

**I've always wanted to use that word.

Railroad Work Camps

" ... The company were compelled to build a number of expensive wagon roads along precipitous ridges and deep ravines. ... In opening a new section of line (between Cisco and Truckee) this was the first thing to be done. ... Then the building for the camps had to be erected, and in the mountain regions they are required to be made strong and capable of resisting the pressure of snow so as to protect the inmates from the inclement storms of this elevated mountain region. These camps are generally built about one mile apart and consist of Store houses, power houses, blacksmith shops, kitchen, eating and sleeping rooms, and stables for mules, horses and oxen. These, with the small buildings erected by the Chinese laborers for their own use, make quite a village."

Report to the Secretary of Interior October 7, 1867



Alfred A. Hart #199 East Portal Summit Tunnel and wagon road.

“I wish to call your minds that the early completion of this railroad we have built has been in large measure due to that poor despised class of laborers called the Chinese – to the fidelity and industry they have shown.”

Sacramento Daily Union May 8, 1869

ground which also dropped the roofs. So the workers were not just excavating the rock they were also continually digging the snow and sometimes the snow fell faster than it could be removed. Work materials had to be lowered down snow shafts, some forty feet tall, and rock debris had to be hoisted up the same shafts for disposal. The Chinese lived all the long summit winters in the snow and it must have been miserable.

Robert Harris visited Summit Camp and reported in September, 1869 issue of Overland Monthly, at Summit Camp there was a little town of wooden buildings. “As sunset approaches, I arrive where the road is less advanced, where more divisions of the army of labor are concentrated; and, tumbling down the granite banks, climbing over the cuts, elbowing my way between crowded workmen, dodging my head from their striking hammers, and my feet from their picks, hurry on.”

Alfred A. Hart #202 East Portal Tunnel 6 about 1868



"In the earlier construction and operation of the Road wooden buildings of a temporary character were put up, but they are now being replaced by others of a more permanent nature. ... "

Department of the Interior,
Report of condition, equipment &c. of Central Pacific Railroad of California
Received Feb. 11, 1869, Dated Jan. 25, 1869

From Special Commissioners, CPRR of California Lloyd Tevis, Sherman Day, and Brvt. Lt. Col. USA RS Williamson

“At about an hour after dark the ‘Summit Camp’ was reached. This is in reality a small town of one and two story houses, built quite strongly, to resist the weight of winter snows...”

The next day “a day of astonishment, wonder, and great satisfaction was before me. Every moment was full of condensed enjoyment. After feasting my eyes upon the beautiful picture framed in the east, with its foreground of Donner Lake, eleven hundred feet below... the day’s visit was begun by a visit to the Summit tunnel of 1,659 feet... through solid granite...”

Those are interesting descriptions of Summit Camp and they make us wonder what life was like. What’s it like to end your grueling eight hour (in the tunnels) or twelve hour (outside) shift and “go home” to the little building you share with others in your group? Each group had a head man, responsible for taking the group’s money to buy food (Chinese railroad workers, as opposed to the white workers, supplied their own board) and each group had a cook who supplied tea and bath water as well as food. How do you get warm in the simple buildings? How do you bathe surrounded by snow? How many times was water shared and who got the clean water first? Then there is the grueling work. In the tunnels each of four faces had three work crews made up of three men. One held the drill bit and the other two swung the 8lb. sledgehammers. There was only candle or lantern light at the tunnel faces. The remnants of black powder saturated the air from explosions. Once the blast holes were drilled and filled with black powder, tamped, and filled with soil, the explosions were set off. Then the rocks were hauled from the blasted faces out of the tunnels and defenestrated or disposed of. Other workers were outside maintaining the tunnels and work complexes in the snow.

Imagine the tedium of the work at the rock faces as the Chinese pounded drill bits into the granite hour after hour, day after day. “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.”
(The Sacramento Union April 22, 1867)



Russell #661 Donner Lake in the background. The snowsheds leading from Tunnel 6 are on the right.

The dangerous nature of work on the Transcontinental railroad.

In Beyond the Mississippi, there is a story about a visit to “Lake Angela, a lovely little mountain gem.”

“It was like picnicking at the North Pole; for snow lined the higher ravines and icicles hung from the water-tanks on the stage-road. Here during the previous winter [1868] they [workers] 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.”

Another story tells of a workman coming along into camp and noting that a house was missing. It had been covered by an avalanche burying fifteen or sixteen men. The men remained buried all day until they were dug out. Only three had died. The rest had been protected by their bunk beds. (Tunnels of the Pacific Railroad, John Gillis, 1870). Then there is the story of an avalanche that took away a cabin filled with Chinese workers who were not found until spring (The Heirloom, June, 2012). Summarizing, James Strobridge, the construction superintendent said before the Pacific Railroad Commission, “snow slides carried away our camps and we lost a good many men in the slides; many of them we did not find until the next season when the snow melted...”

In 1866, the Dutch Flat Enquirer said, "we are now in the midst of one of the most severe winters we have experienced." Tunnel portals were buried. Chinese encampments were snowed under. The Chinese lived under the snow. Chimneys poked up through the snow. Airshafts were dug through the snow. Walkways went through the snow in tunnels, Snow had to be continually shoveled away to get to the real work. Work materials had to be lowered down snow shafts some forty feet tall and rock debris had to be hoisted up the same shafts for disposal. The Chinese lived in the snow and it must have been miserable.

All of the work and the numbers are one way of looking at things. But we should also think of the hive of activity at Summit Camp. Work at the faces continued twenty-four hours a day six days a week with three shifts per day. There must have always been workers going back and forth, moving rock, shoveling snow and preparing meals, tea, and wash water. Supplies must have been continually delivered. Robert Harris, above, gives us an idea, "elbowing my way between crowded workmen, dodging my head from their striking hammers, and my feet from their picks, hurry on." Albert Richardson, a New York Tribune reporter captured the activity in other ways in his 1865 book, Beyond the Mississippi, "swarming among the Sierras like flies upon a honeycomb," or "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..."

Then those hundreds of workers had Sundays off and certainly weren't in the tunnels. How many games of "Go" were being played, how much money was waged in bets? How much opium was smoked? How many stories were told and dreams dreamed? How much of Sunday activities was recovering from pure exhaustion?

Then too, the tunnel was being billed as an engineering feat and drew tourists. How many tourists and newspaper reporters were milling around?

Today there is only the site of Summit Camp (see page 1 and pages 8-9). Over time there has been a lot of activity nearby which is not good for the preservation of an historical site. The old photographs show wooden buildings but there are no timbers left. Presumably when Summit Camp was abandoned and the railroad needed building materials for other facilities on the summit (see page 4), the buildings of Summit Camp were taken apart and the materials used elsewhere. Parenthetically there's a long history of that on the summit. Later on, a number of summit buildings were built with discarded snowshed timbers so it's reasonable to assume that Summit Camp was recycled too.

Archeologists found, during their visits: foundation remains for 12 x 25' and 12 x 30' buildings (see page 9, archeologists were able to correlate the foundation remains of several buildings to ones seen in Alfred A. Hart photographs); bottle glass, primarily whiskey and wine and one bottle of "bitters;" metal buckles such as for overalls; metal buttons

showing at least some American clothing styles; Chinese coins (not used for money – see sidebar page 16); brass opium boxes; crude heavy porcelain rice bowls (several score found); gaming pieces; Chinese and American tableware; some fine porcelain pieces; window glass; bowls with porcelain glaze from Canton; opium pipe bowls; wok fragments; larger stoneware vessels, jars, and smaller containers; fragments of large flat pans; and the remains of cooking hearths. These last "providing evidence for use of traditional cooking methods and suggesting that communal cooking occurred on the site" which validates historical records.

What was found in Summit Camp and other work camps around the Western U.S. showed that "Food, liquor, medicine, and various novelties were constantly flowing from Guangdong (province in China) toward America for Chinese workers who could afford minor luxuries from home. Gaming equipment was included in the regular exports to America." That included coins.

Soil samples near hearths indicate usage of local foodstuffs as well as imported: rice barley, legumes. We know from historical records the Chinese ate a varied diet: oysters, abalone, dried bamboo, seaweed, mushrooms, dried fruits, rice, crackers, vermicelli, salted cabbage, etc.

Today there are square nails, pointing to the wooden buildings, some possible hearth configurations of rocks, small pieces of glass, pieces of metal, bits of stoneware, and the outlines of building foundations. One can stand in the midst of Summit Camp, or on some granite overlooking Summit Camp, and imagine the hive of activity that was Summit Camp as hundreds of workers worked to build the first trans-continental railroad and join California to the nation and the world (see the meaning of the railroad in the June, '16 and March, '19 Heirlooms).

From Commentary in Celebration of the Transcontinental RR

For the completion of a railroad across the Sierras [sic] removes the only obstacle which has been regarded as insuperable to a vital connection between the Atlantic and Pacific coasts. For California it means much, but it means more for the country at large and for mankind.

“The people of this continent are no longer severed by mountain barriers which would make of them two nations, diverse and hostile. We may now make certain of a common national life that shall secure not only our own best interests, but the largest and noblest influence upon the nations, from whom, on either hand, we are parted by an ocean, and whose destinies we must seriously affect.” December 2, 1867 Sacramento Daily Union

That same year the Sacramento Daily Union (December 2, 1867) enthused, “... The company have great reason to congratulate themselves upon the monument of American engineering, energy and enterprise which their road undoubtedly is. No other great public work has met with obstacles apparently more insuperable, and none has overcome its difficulties of various kinds, with more determined perseverance. ... in the East and in Europe they will fill the public mind with added respect for the practical genius of the American.”

The Daily Alta California (June 20, 1868) got into the act almost a year before the road was finished saying it was “The grandest highway created for the march of commerce and civilization around the globe.”

Two days before the railroad’s completion and the driving of the Golden Spike the Sacramento Union said (May 8, 1869) that the railroad was “a victory over space, the elements, and the stupendous mountain barriers separating the East from the West, and apparently defying the genius and energy of man to surmount. Every heart was gladdened by the contemplation of the grand achievement.”

The completion of the railroad in 1869 was a national event and there were huge celebrations.

Once the immediate reporting was done, book authors took up the celebratory task. Alfred Richardson in Beyond the Mississippi, published in 1869, said, “...this magic key will unlock our Golden Gate, and send surging through its rocky portals a world-encircling tide of travel, commerce, and Christian civilization.”



Left shows the outline of buildings that were at Summit Camp. The rocks were the foundation. Picture by the DSHS MHRT's George Lamson

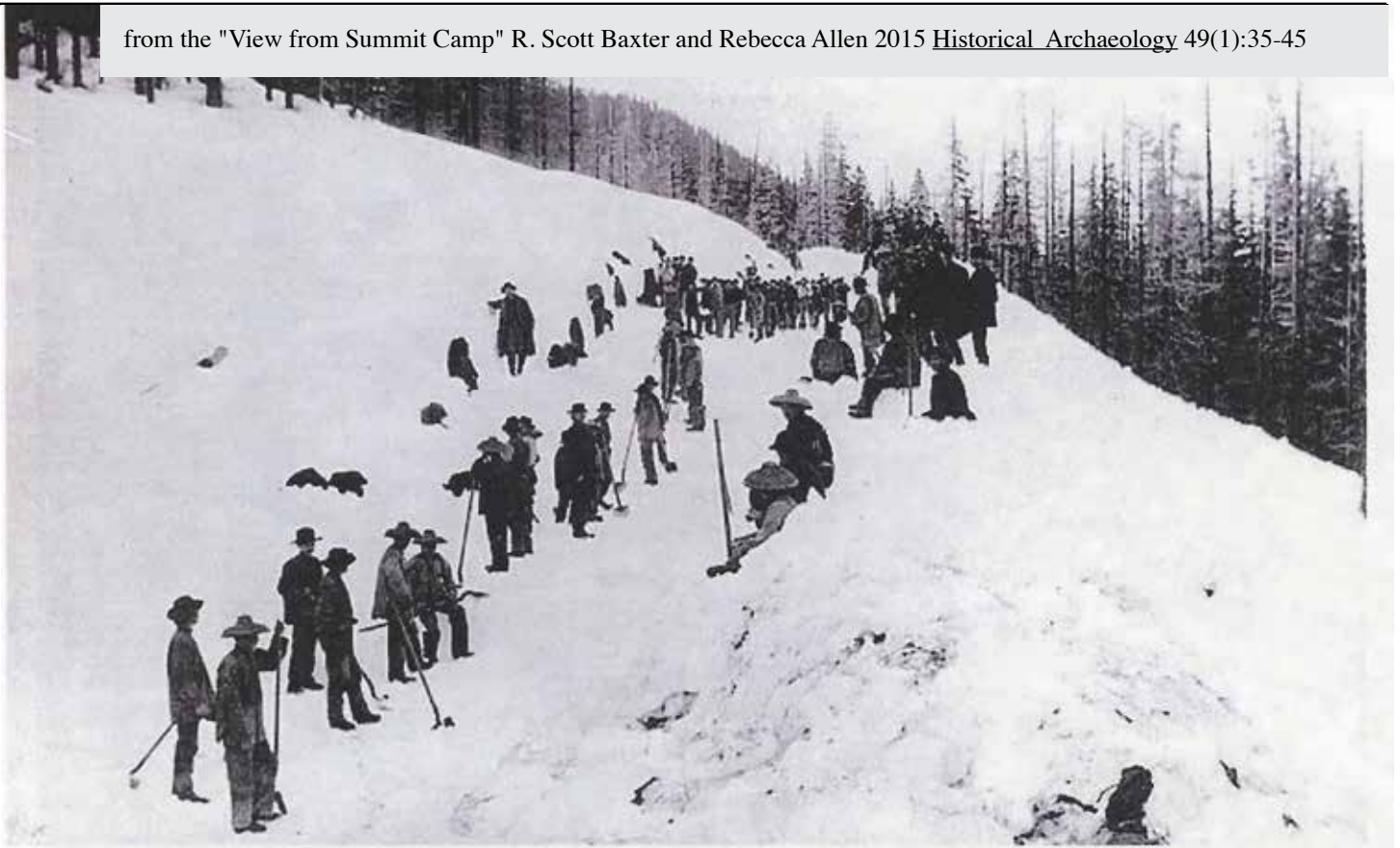


FIGURE 2. Chinese railroad workers, working in the midst of snow. (Photo <<http://scalar.usc.edu/anvc/the-knotted-line/media/railroad-in-winter.jpg>>, late 19th century.)



FIGURE 4. Hearth feature at Summit Camp. (Photo by R. S. Baxter, 2007.)

Above: possible hearth configuration from the "View from Summit Camp" R. Scott Baxter and Rebecca Allen 2015 *Historical Archaeology* 49(1):35-45

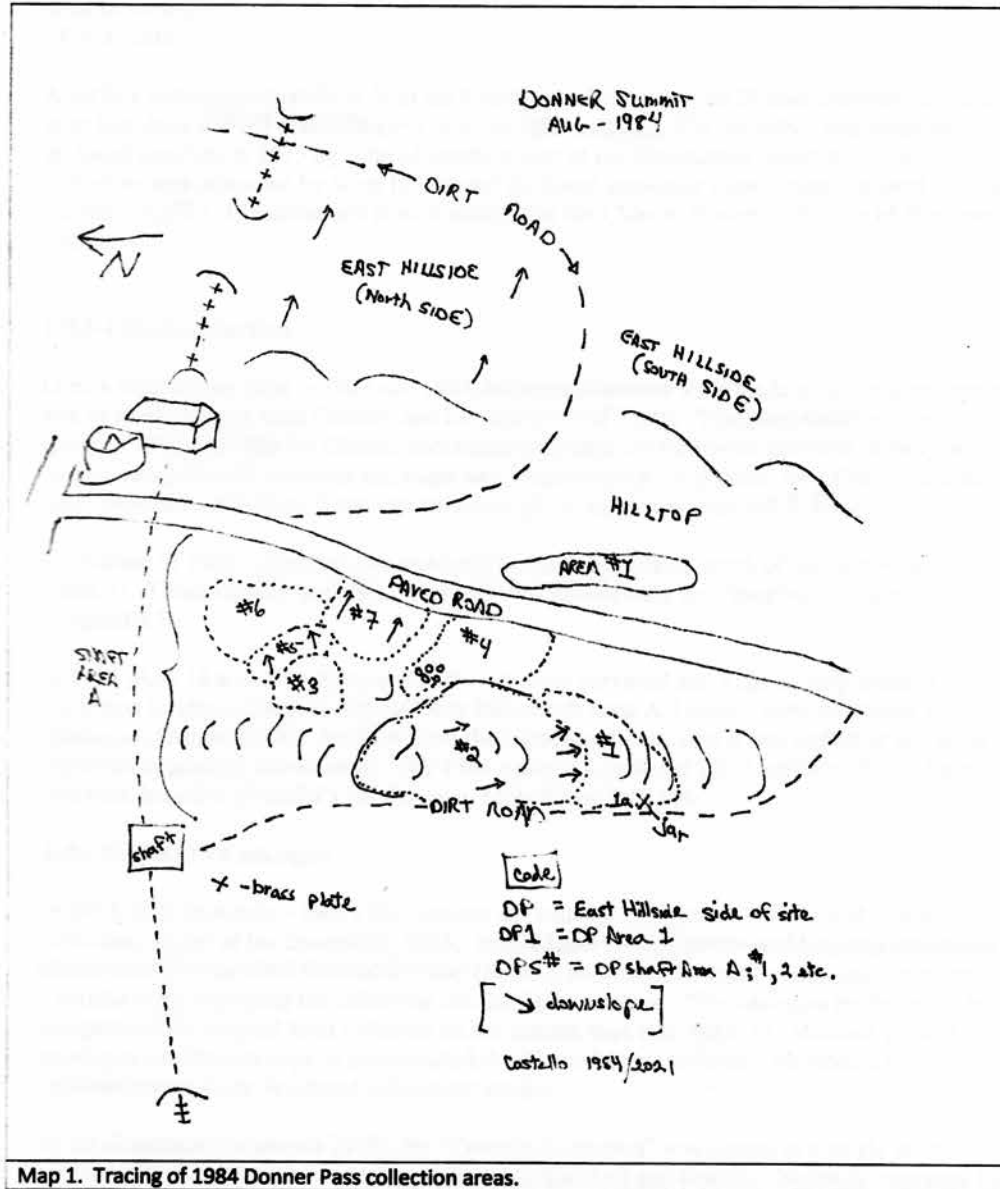


Above: possible hearth stone configuration at Summit Camp. Picture by George Lamson

Virginia City, March 1st – 8:15 P.M. – A Snowslide occurred on the Summit, on the Donner Lake Route, crushing a house occupied by Chinamen, Who were working in the Central Pacific Railroad Tunnel, killing some thirty of them. [sic]

Daily Alta California March 2, 1867

Attachments



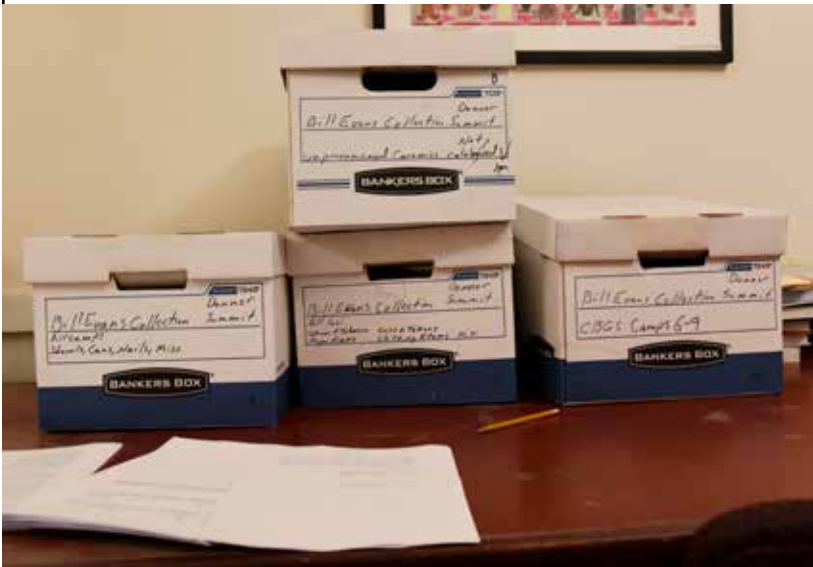
Facing granite was not the only obstacle. The workers faced avalanches and heavy snows: 40 feet that first winter. There were dozens of storms one of which dumped six feet of snow. Those storms built up cornices on the ridge tops and when the cornices got too heavy they broke off. Avalanches were common. One story tells of a workman coming along and noting that a house was missing. It had been covered by an avalanche burying fifteen or sixteen men. The men remained buried all day until they were dug out. Only three had died the rest had been protected by their bunk beds. Those were only a few of the avalanche stories. Summarizing, James Strobridge, the construction superintendent said before the Pacific Railroad Commission, "snow slides carried away our camps and we lost a good many men in the slides; many of them we did not find until the next season when the snow melted..."

July '12 Heirloom

Artifacts of Summit Camp

What follows is a sampling from the Chinese railroad workers collections at the Chinese Historical Society of So. California.

Found by archeologists: bottle glass, primarily whiskey and wine and one bottle of "bitters;" metal buckles such as for overalls; metal buttons showing at least some American clothing styles; Chinese coins (not used for money – see sidebar page 16); brass opium boxes; crude heavy porcelain rice bowls (several score found); gaming pieces; Chinese and American tableware; some fine porcelain pieces; window glass; bowls with porcelain glaze from Canton; opium pipe bowls; wok fragments; larger stoneware vessels, jars, and smaller containers; fragments of large flat pans; and the remains of cooking hearths. These last “providing evidence for use of traditional cooking methods and suggesting that communal cooking occurred on the site” which validates historical records.



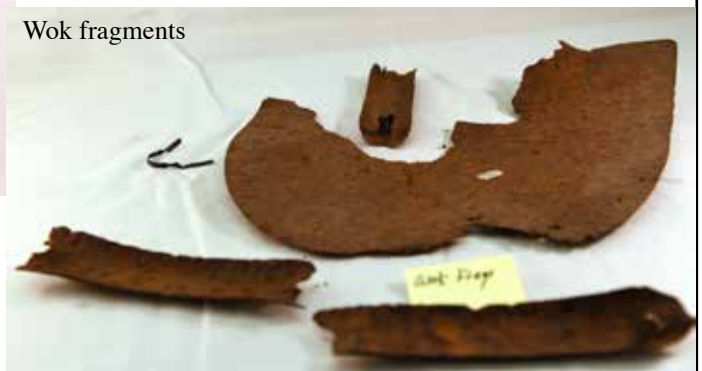
The collections are stored in more than a dozen file boxes.



miscellaneous bits of metal.

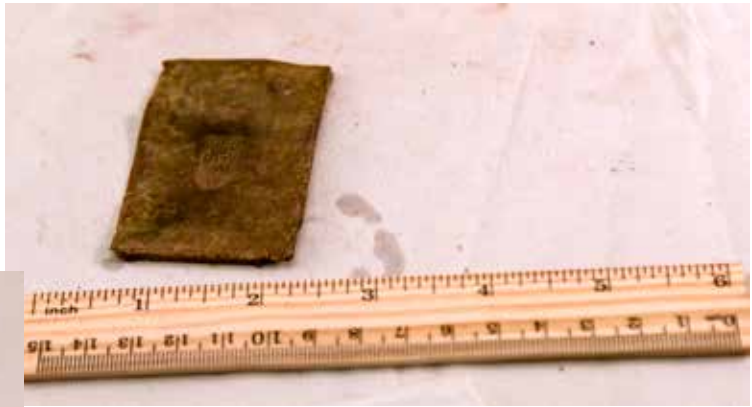


A dab of white was put on each piece to serve as a substrate for the fragment's identification number. Imagine the tedious archeological work.





opium cans



Artifacts are kept in plastic bags in the file boxes (previous page) and then each fragment is labeled. A dab of white was put on each piece to serve as a substrate for the fragment's identification number. Imagine the tedious archeological work.

Medicine bottle



opium pipe parts



square nails



lock plate



shovel parts



Buckles



Fork

glass fragments



Buttons







from the August, '16 [Heirloom](#)

Uses of Chinese Coins

Some of the artifacts found at Summit Camp were Chinese coins. One wonders what their presence signifies. Fortunately, in our investigations, we have some answers which come from an article in Historical Archeology called appropriately, “Asian Coins Recovered from Chinese Railroad Labor Camps.”

We can learn about daily life in the camps from the coins’ presence. Coins “were never used as money in North America but were imported for many other uses, such as gaming and counting pieces and talismanic items, and were employed in folk medicine.” They were also used for decoration and good luck.

In folk medicine the coins were boiled in water with the resulting tea either drunk or made into a paste. Coins were rubbed on the body to cure “hot” diseases like colds and flu. “Systemic massage” was done with the smooth edge of a coin rubbed in the direction of the spine and then out, parallel to the ribs.

Coins found at railroad worker camps were from the Qing Dynasty, were 18-28 mm in diameter, and had no dates. Coins did show the reign of current emperor by showing not his actual name, but his slogan-like name. That name was chosen in consultation with historians, astrologers, and advisors. The coins are brass or copper.



Wok fragments puzzled together found by a homeowner near the Donner Summit community of Rainbow.



Linda Bentz of the Chinese Historical Society of So. California also provided us with some reading material, for example, "What's in the Pot? An Emic Study of Chinese Brown Glazed Stoneware" by Jeannie K. Yang and Virginia R. Hellmann Anthropological Studies Center Sonoma State University Rohnert Park, CA 94928

Some bits of information gleaned from reading:

Brown stoneware contained food from Canton
Vessels were made by hundreds of small potters
in Canton,

After being produced in pottery kilns, brown stoneware would be shipped to food processing factories to be filled with food items, then transported to the stores in various towns. You could buy them almost anywhere about sixty to seventy years ago, but they started disappearing from the markets within the last decade.

"These are general food containers. Archaeologists are always looking for one particular function, but these Chinese containers weren't used that way. They would be used for anything, and there was no "gospel" involved.

To conclude, we can say that, despite the foreign environment that surrounded them, the Chinese who lived in Sacramento during the Gold-Rush Period were able to retain some of their native foodways. Chinese merchants, knowing their countrymen's tastes, imported familiar items into the U.S., which found a ready market in Old Sacramento. Resources were few, so Chinese brown glazed stoneware became your everyday Tupperware.

After pulling bag after bag of ceramic pieces from the collections of the Chinese Historical Society of Southern California Linda Bentz took the MHRT into their neighboring building where they had a display of Chinese crockery from the time period that had been pulled out of excavations in Los Angeles. This is what the Chinese crockery at Summit camp would have looked like. Then Linda provided us with a description keyed to the photograph.

Chinese Brown Glazed Stoneware

Description from picture:

Right side back: jar with spout and handle: unknown contents, possibly medicine
Large jar: held sugar or rice
Wide mouth jar with lid: held pickled vegetables or sauces
Hour glass shaped jars: Wine jar
Short jar with spout: held soy sauce
Green jar: held ginger
Shorter jars: Contents unknown. Could have held cosmetics, or condiments.

Book Review

Nameless Builders of the Transcontinental

Wm. Chew 128 pages not including appendices 2004

It was a visit to Promontory Point in Utah by the author and his wife that sparked his, "As an adult, I had long been aware of the significant impact Chinese manpower had on the completion of the Transcontinental but I was saddened to learn that this estimated army of thousands remained unknowns and nameless.

"... I resolved that I would get the names, photos, and stories about these workers by locating their descendants."

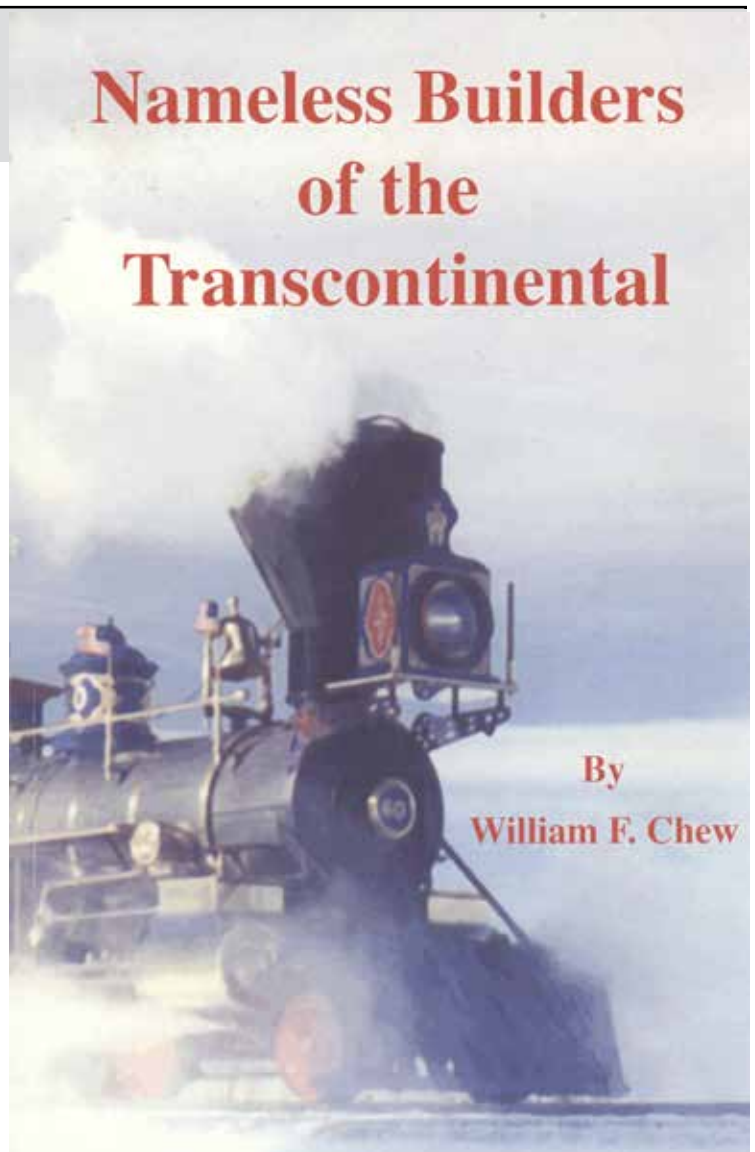
This quest is a really good idea and if it could be accomplished would right just one of many wrongs committed against the Chinese in California. Unfortunately Mr. Chew discovered that the evidence needed to expose Chinese workers' names does not exist. He was able to find only a few descendants of the transcontinental railroad's building. Even though the hunt for names could not come to fruition Chew continued with his quest but that leaves us with a very short book. That said, there are some interesting facts but also some questionable evidence.

Chew's research is focused mostly on one thing, using existing CPRR payroll records to gather information about nameless Chinese transcontinental railroad workers. The book's title comes from the fact that the CPRR employees of Chinese background were hired in groups. A group's leader was entered into the CPRR company records but generally no individual Chinese laborers' names made it

into the books. These people were the heroes of the transcontinental railroad without whom it could not have been built and yet they were treated as anonymous. That of course, undercuts the heroism and undercuts a great story. It's also an example of 19th Century American culture that we'll add here, "In Appreciation." (See page 20)

Most of the book's eleven chapters are very short giving just cursory, though sometimes interesting, information. Chapter 4 is what Chew called the "meat" of things where he analyzes the payroll records to answer a couple of questions, when did the first Chinese workers appear and how many were there. For the start of workers, Chew says that in January/February, 1864 the first two Chinese names appeared in the records along with twenty-three more spaces for the unnamed. The two actual names were the gang bosses for apparently two gangs. Then he goes into analyzing the documents to ascertain how many Chinese workers there were. Unfortunately, many of the payroll records no longer exist so Chew does some estimating to get to 816 gang bosses who averaged 23 laborers per gang. Leaving out non-laborers Chew says there were 23,004 workers which is more than the commonly accepted number of somewhere around ten thousand. He backs his number up by saying there were 53,000 Chinese in California at the time and a couple of sources said that one fourth of that population was engaged in the transcontinental railroad. That amended his estimate to 14,000 workers. He jiggers that to get to a possible

"The Chinese workers were deducted the cost of their construction tools. Imagine working from dawn to dusk, twelve hours a day, in the heat of summer and the cold of winter, to pay \$1.50 for a shovel and \$2.50 for a pick."



24,000 but since the payroll records are missing for many years we'll never know. His mathematical gymnastics are interesting but not conclusive at all and so, useless except for speculation. This is just one problem. Historical research is not done this way, guessing and extrapolating beyond actual evidence. If the evidence doesn't exist then abandon the question, note the lack of evidence, and move on to other questions or investigations related to the same subject.

Chew spent some time trying to ascertain how long each worker worked which is a good question but again, since the records are missing and the workers in the existing records are unnamed, it's a pointless exercise.

Even though we don't have the evidence to pursue substantive answers there are a few interesting facts, such as Chinese workers had to pay for their tools, see the accompanying chart to the right.

There are some other problems too. The picture quality is not good. In one spot Chew notes that someone is mentioned as a hostler in the records and he wonders if that is a euphemism for some-one running a house of ill repute. Why anyone would think that I have no idea. Then Chew also breaks down the Chinese building effort into four parts: Bloomer Cut, Cape Horn, the ten miles of track in one day, and the thirteen tunnels needed to get over the Sierra. I wonder at the ten miles of track in one day being equated with the others much longer termed aspects of the Transcontinental's building, and the short shrift he gives to the tunnels. He hardly mentions the one that took two years with progress made only in inches a day. Chew also spends some time talking about the workers being lowered in baskets at Cape Horn. He says we'll never know for sure if that was done but accepted modern research says it didn't happen.

In the end Chew found a few descendants of railroad workers but nothing comes of that and so the exercise was kind of futile.

Nameless Builders of the Transcontinental Railroad

Table III. Pro Forma Income and Expenses (Estimated)

Income:		
Average Wage @ \$1.00/day		\$30.00
Monthly Expenses:		
Steamship transportation:	\$1.66	(\$40 amortized for 2 yrs.)
Interest for loan @ 4%:	\$0.14	(\$3.20 amortized for 2 yrs.)
Food purchase share	\$6.00	
Herbal medicine	\$1.50	
Headman fee	\$2.00	
Letter writer	\$0.50	
Association fee	\$1.00	
Purchase shovel @ \$1.50	\$0.20	(amortized 1 yr.)
Total Expenses:	\$13.00	<\$13.00>
Monthly Net Income:		\$17.00

Where Chinese workers' wages went.

Without the Chinese, it would have been impossible to complete the Western portion of this great national highway.

Leland Stanford

In Appreciation

The transcontinental railroad was the engineering achievement of the 19th Century, at least up to 1869. The work could not have been done without the Chinese. It was a herculean effort but one that was hardly appreciated at the time..

The entire country was able to participate in the driving of the Golden Spike at Promontory Point, Utah on May 10, 1869. The transcontinental railroad was finished and the dignitaries had gathered. The driving of the Golden Spike was to be the ceremonial finish. A wire had been attached to the spike maul and another wire to the Golden Spike. Each strike of the maul on the Golden Spike would send a click across the telegraph wires to the country. The nation would instantaneously know the tracks from the east and the west were joined.

As the last spike was driven bells rang and people rejoiced and not just at Promontory Point, Utah.

The railroad was done.

Festivities were the order of the day. Sacramento, the starting point of the western portion of the road, and San Francisco had huge celebrations that must have been planned far in advance. There were also celebrations in Virginia City, Stockton, Petaluma, Placerville, and Vallejo.

In Sacramento there had been ads in the papers drawing people to the celebration. The Sacramento Union said on May 8, 1869 that the completion of the railroad was "a victory over space, the elements, and the stupendous mountain barriers separating the East from the West, and apparently defying the genius and energy of man to surmount. Every heart was gladdened by the contemplation of the grand achievement."

Sacramento had a grand parade and the Daily Alta California reported, "A more favorable day could not be asked. A bright, unclouded sky, the sun tempered with refreshing air, Sacramento never saw a more favorable occasion for a public celebration. At dawn the people were moving; ...At an early hour a train arrived with firemen of Nevada Engine Company, No. 1, from Gold Hill... fine stalwart fellows, and well capable of battling with the destroying element anywhere.... [more firemen arrived from elsewhere]... About the same hour the boat arrived from San Francisco, bringing five bands.... Every manufacturing establishment and mercantile house is gaily decorated. ...There is a great profusion of bunting and flags.... The streets are now crowded, the people expecting the commencement of the exercises by the announcement of the driving of the last spike... Everybody is in holiday garb. The hotels are full... The scenes in the principal streets are indescribably lively. Constantly

steamers, trains, cars and country vehicles are arriving, adding confusion to the throng... One thousand school children from city and country are here to participate in the fruition and the hope of their parents."

"A minute ... before 10 o'clock the completion was announced of the laying of the last rail and the driving of the last spike on the Central Pacific Railroad. Immediately following the report there went up a most unearthly din, produced by all the engines owned by the Company, which were gaily decorated and arranged along the city front, with a chorus of all the stationary engines and city boats and the ringing of city bells, which continued ten minutes, during which person of weak tympana put their fingers in their ears, and rejoiced when the chorus was over. Thousands were present who never before and never will again hear such a grand diapason. The engineers vied with one another in producing screeches and sounding notes. There was harmony and discord... All the principal streets were packed, rendering locomotion difficult. The procession commenced moving at eleven o'clock."

The parade included bands; the militia; the National Guard accompanied by artillery; firemen; machinists; blacksmiths; boilermakers; wagons with machinery; contingents of civic organizations; a boiler and attached smokestack; 29 omnibuses, carriages, and wagons of school children; private societies in parade attire; politicians; a contingent of weavers; carriages; buggies; and horsemen; rail workers; wagons from the telegraph company and Wells Fargo; etc. Participants arrived in 18 trains. There was bunting, banners with stirring quotes, and flags; speeches and poems; there was music; and there was prayer. There were throngs of people, even some of the workers who'd laid the 10 miles of track in one day. The parade took hours to pass.

The first shovel used to build the railroad was exhibited as were the first tie and a picture of the last one.

In San Francisco the Bulletin reported Judge Nathan Bennett's speech. He said this triumph of railroad construction was wholly owing to the fact that his fellow Californians were "composed of the right materials, derived from the proper origins... In the veins of our people flows the commingled blood of the four greatest nationalities of modern days. The impetuous daring and dash of the French, the philosophical spirit of the German, the unflinching solidity of the English, and the light-hearted impetuosity of the Irish, have all contributed each its appropriate share... A people deducing its origins from such races, and condensing their best traits into its national life, is capable of any achievements." It was stirring.

There were no Chinese at all in the Sacramento or San Francisco celebrations, even though they had made up the vast majority of CPRR workers and were the ones who laid

the record ten miles of track in one day. Not far in the future mobs would burn out Chinatowns and Chinese businesses along the route of the railroad and assault individual Chinese. Prejudice would be officially mandated by court decisions in California and, nationally, the Chinese Exclusionary Act would be passed just a dozen years later in 1882.

How quickly people can forget.

It was not just at the time of the railroad's completion that the Chinese were forgotten or ignored.

1928

In 1928 in the Southern Pacific (the Central Pacific had been absorbed) Bulletin (Vol. 16, no. 5, pg 3) said "Fifty-nine years ago a squad of eight Irishmen and a small army of Chinese coolies made a record in track laying that has never been equaled..." "Fired with enthusiasm" the team laid ten miles fifty-six feet of track in one day.

"The names of the Irish rail handlers have been passed down through the years. Their super human achievement will be remembered as long as there is railroad history." With no note of irony, because it was expected at the time, the article continued, "So, too, will that day's work of 'John Chinamen' be recalled as the most stirring even in the building of the railroad." Chinese workers weren't worthy of having their names remembered and indeed were not even considered as individuals by the railroad. Their names have been lost to history.

1969

One would think that as modern times arrived the story would have changed. But on the 100th anniversary of the completion of the railroad in 1969 a celebration was held. The Chinese Historical Society of America moved to ensure recognition of the Chinese contribution. They had two commemorative plaques made to install during the Golden Spike Ceremony at Promontory Point, Utah. The plaque dedication was not included in the official program although the Historical Society received a telegram saying that a spokesman for the "Chinese [sic] Community would be on the platform. During the ceremony, when no Chinese were allowed to speak, The Secretary of Labor, John Volpe, said, 'Who else but Americans could drill ten tunnels in mountains thirty feet deep in snow? Who else but Americans could chisel through miles of solid granite...' Who else indeed, except the Chinese who did do the tunneling of fifteen tunnels and did chisel through solid granite.

From Finding Hidden Voices of the Chinese Railroad Workers, 2016 (see the October, '16 Heirloom for a review or go to the DSHS website (<http://www.donnertsummithistoricalociety.org/pages/bookreviews/HiddenVoicesChineseRRworkers.html>).

For more information see the Chinese Railroad Workers in North America Project at Stanford University <http://web.stanford.edu/group/chineserailroad/cgi-bin/wordpress/>

Chinese Exclusionary Act, 1882

An Act to execute certain treaty stipulations relating to Chinese.

Whereas in the opinion of the Government of the United States the coming of Chinese laborers to this country endangers the good order of certain localities within the territory thereof: Therefore,...

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That from and after the expiration of ninety days next after the passage of this act, and until the expiration of ten years next after the passage of this act, the coming of Chinese laborers to the United States be, and the same is hereby, suspended; and during such suspension it shall not be lawful for any Chinese laborer to come, or having so come after the expiration of said ninety days to remain within the United States.

...

SEC. 14. That hereafter no State court or court of the United States shall admit Chinese to citizenship; and all laws in conflict with this act are hereby repealed.

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