SOUTHWEST CHAPTER, R&LHS

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The next meeting of the Southwest chapter will be Wed. , November 13, 2013 at Amigo's Restaurant, 2000 Montana St. Same meeting time, 6 pm.

The Chinese Railroad Builders of El Paso

by Wayne C. Calk

(*Ed. Note: This article first appeared in the Flyer of March, 1989 and was provided by Robby Peartree.)*

It is difficult to ascertain the exact year and means by which the first Chinese came to the United States. Some informal sources place the arrival of the Chinese in North America and other regions of the Western Hemisphere even before colonial days. Certain historians describe the presence of Chinese shipbuilders in lower California as early as 1571, of Chinese laborers in the Far West in 1788, and of one Chinese living in New York in 1807. There is evidence of trade in China by American merchants in 1784. This trade was carried on for some 60 years before relations between the two countries were formalized by the Treaty of Wanghia on July 3, 1844. However, the first formal documentation by the American Immigration Commission records 1820 as the year the first Chinese came to the United States. [1]

From 1820 to 1847, the number of Chinese in America was only about 15. In 1848 gold was discovered at John Sutter's Sawmill north of San Francisco. With the merchant ships trading with China, the news of a gold strike spread along the eastern coast of China. However, the strike aroused only the interest of the people of Toishan. They were an adventuring people who had been contained by their country's border and had suppressed their desires for new horizons when they reached the sea. With the news of abundant gold in California, their desire for new adventures was again aroused. In 1848 the records show the arrival of only three Chinese in California. By 1849, the number had reached 54.

The desires of the people of Toishan to reach California outweighed the consequences of their country's repressive emigration policy. In the 1840's, when the first Chinese had already set sail for California, they knew that, if caught, they would be immediately executed. China's repressive policy on emigration was not relaxed until the 1860's. Even after the change, the emperors never encouraged emigration, but instead promoted Chinese social tradition and national pride.

The number of Chinese in California totaled 4,000 by the end of 1850. Their rapid influx was largely due to th demand for cheap labor in this new state. Natural calamities and the horrors of war during the Taiping Revolution (1850-64) made many Chinese flee from Kwantung Province to Hong Kong nd Macao, where they were contracted by collie traders and shipped

to the west coast of the United States and other countries, particularly Peru and Cuba. The term “coolie” is derived from two Chinese words that sound like “ku” and “li”, meaning bitter strength or bitter work. The two words were combined by the British in India to form “kuli” used to describe unskilled laborer. [2]

During the year 1851, the Chinese population in California increased form 4,000 to 25,000 in one year. This rapid growth rate of the Oriental population caused the California legislature to impose a $3.00 tax on foreign miners and still another law required a ship’s captain to pay form $5.00 to $10.00 per passenger. This did not deter the Chinese in the United States with another 30,000 arriving by 1870.

Anti-Chinese feelings had been brewing for some time among white workers because of the competition from the Chinese Because Chinese accepted jobs that white men did not want, they often had jobs while white men did not. As time passed, the Chinese, who had been described as thrifty, hard-working, honest and peaceful were instead termed dishonest, mean, and deceitful, and were accused of undermining the living standard because they lived on such low wages. Chinese were charged with taking jobs away from white men because they were willing to accept less pay. The records of the Central Pacific show that white men received $35.00 per month with board, while Chinese received $35.00 without board because they liked to prepare their own food.

Some 40,000 Chinese miners were driven out of the mining camps in California. This anti-Chinese feeling was quite prevalent throughout the country. Wherever the Chinese went, they faced hostility and violence. Outside El Paso, Mexican section hands attacked a railroad crew of Chinese. Probably the most celebrated case was the killing of a Chinese by an Irishman. Justice of the Peace Roy Bean, who preferred whiskey-drinking Irishmen anyway, acquitted the man on the grounds he could find no law against “killing a Chinaman.”[3] At least one lynching occurred in El Paso. As if white violence was not enough, Apache Indians attacked a Chinese survey crew on the Eagle Pass extension below Del Rio on the Rio Grande, killing all eleven.

Despite increasing trouble with the Indians, surveys were made and plans for a railroad to the far west went forward as Abe Lincoln took office as President. On July 1, 1862, President Lincoln signed an act authorizing construction of a railroad from the Missouri River to the Pacific coast. The following year, he fixed the eastern end of the Union Pacific at Omaha, Nebraska.

Meanwhile, the Central Pacific had already begun trudging through the Sierra Nevada mountains. Trestles were to he built across deep canyons and gorges and tunnels were to be drilled basically by hand. It was a struggle against the elements. The work required about 5,000 men in the beginning, but Charles Crocker, one of the original owners and the head of the construction crews, was seldom able to hire over 800. The brawny Irish crews had threatened a strike if their wages were not raised. With the Civil War going on, they assumed that they had the odds in their favor. Crocker had heard of the diligence of the Chinese in the mining towns and urged Harvey Strowbridge, his chief of staff, to take on some Chinese workers. Strowbridge was a six-foot tall New Englander who had seen some of the Orientals and concluded that they were too frail for the work and too unmechanical to perform it. Crocker finally convinced Strowbridge to take on 50 of the Orientals as an experiment. The experiment was quite successful in that the work done by the Chinese was good and the others, threatened by these new workers, went to work with earnest. The Chinese had proven to Strowbridge that they were capable of any kind of work given to them. At this time, Strowbridge decided to put on another crew of 50. This process continued until he had hired several thousand Chinese workers. Most of the Chinese gold miners in California had gone on to other endeavors and those that wanted to work on the railroad were snatched up quickly. As the supply of Chinese laborers began to run out in California, professional labor contractors began recruit more workers from the Cantonese district of Sinong and Sinwai. The Chinese had turned out to be ideal railroaders in several respects. The were quick to learn, slow to gripe, didn't fight except among themselves, and worked from whistle to whistle. They didn't even get drunk and very seldom visited the "girls" that closely followed the railroad lines. The Chinese had the habit of bathing every day, and probably as important as anything, they drank boiled tea. The late Ben Dowell Phillips, son of El Paso's first mayor, in an interview a few years before his death recalled, "The Chinese were smarter than most

Early El Paso Station Stop (Turill photo)

folks in this country. They wouldn't drink just plain water. They carried little pots and now and then you would see a little fire pop up and the workers would make themselves a pot of tea and drink that. It was a great health precaution." [4] There were many times the Chinese were called on to do]obs that other men didn't want to do or actually feared doing. Once while working in the Sierra Nevada, they had to be hung in baskets over a canyon to chisel and blast out a path for the ledge that would soon be a footing for the rails. Strowbridge had learned of a new European "blasting oil" called nitroglycerin, eight times as powerful as black powder, and therefore needing smaller holes. On a hot day in April, San Francisco was shaken by an explosion that killed 12 bystanders. This caused such an intense reaction from the Public that all shipments of the highly unstable blasting oil into California were suspended. So it was back to the Chinese chiselers and the slow task required for the black powder method. A short time later Strowbridge got around the ban by shipping in the glycerln, nitric, and sulphuric acids. Separately they were not dangerous. Then they were mixed on site. After this delay, progress resumed at twice the former pace. The first transcontinental line was completed on May 10, 1869.

It was not until May 19, 1881, that the railroad line coming from the west arrived in El Paso. A wave of I,200 Chinese workers labored into the city on that day bringing locomotives that would carry a payload of progress and prosperity. The town of El Paso was described by railroaders as "a sun-baked village of adobe houses, of cantinas where the beer was warm and the tequila was plenty hot." [5] Almost instantly Chinese restaurants, stores, and laundries began to spring up to fill the needs and soothe the homesickness of Chinese men separated from their families. The population of El Paso just prior to the arrival of the rails was 736, of which no Chinese were listed. There were a few hundred of the original I,200 that stayed in El Paso. Some joined the railroad crews building the Mexican Central. Others opened different kinds of businesses, and the rest moved on east toward San Antonio. Another group hired on to help build the connecting line building west from San Antonio. After the arrival of the railroad, El Paso's population had grown to 1,500. The actual number of Chinese fluctuated from a couple of hundred to nearly a thousand. The fluctuation came about from the illegal entry into the United States by Chinese from Mexico. The immigration laws at this time were tight, causing the Chinese to gain entry into the United States by the best means possible. This means was usually through a series of tunnels dug between Ciudad Juarez and El Paso. The Chinese supposedly studied English while living in Juarez and then, having become "saavy" to American ways and language, the would move through the tunnels and emerge from houses like ordinary visitors. The only discrepancy was that no one ever saw these people going into the houses.[6] The early-day Chinese seldom remained in El Paso for any length of time. They would move on, only to be replaced by other Chinese. The number of Chinese laborers used on the railroad between El Paso and San Antonio was approximately 5,000. The were again led by a man they called "One Eyed Bossy Man." He was Harvey Strowbridge, the same man that brought the rails from California. He lost his eye while waiting impatiently on a slow blasting fuse. Strowbridge was supplied with manpower by labor contractors like El Pasoan Sam Bing who became wealthy importing Chinese for the Southern Pacific crews. Sam Bing was probably the most influential Chinese in the city in those days. He was an active tong organizer and was sort of a private banker for the community. Once the Chinese got to the work site, they were organized into gangs of 12 to 30 men for all activities. A "head man" received a daily account of his gang's time. He divided the time among the members, bought and paid for all provisions used by his gang, and collected the amount owed by each member at the end of the month. Each group had its own cook responsible for meals. The Chinese subsisted on peanut oil, tea, pork, and poultry for the most part. Meals were cooked in large woks, placed on double hearths, which the Chinese built of rock at each new camp. The remains of two of these ovens are located on a ranch near the-tunnel sites where the larges concentration of Chinese workers lived.[7] Separation seemed to be the only way to keep the violence down between the Anglo workers and the Chinese. Consequently, for the most part, they lived and worked apart.

The Chinese lived in tents supplied by the Southern Pacific. Montgomery Ward was one source of the tents. Tent stakes were often held in place with stones because they could not be driven into the ground. The camp structures depended mainly upon the function and life expectancy of the camp itself. Camps near the two tunnels were occupied for approximately a year and had several structures of a semi-permanent nature. At Tunnel No. 1, the camp reached a population of approximately 500 and sprawled over 14 acres.

Evidence shows that the tent structures were neither comfortable, roomy, nor stable. Storms, though not frequent, brought destruction. One storm on June 11, 1882, was especially destructive. One man was killed when lightning struck his tent. Winds blew down the entire camp of Henry & Dilley, 100 tents in all. Henry Weir's saloon was also blown down. Overall, life at the construction camps on the Southern Pacific was not too pleasant.

On January 11, 1883, only a canyon separated the eastern and western divisions, and over this an iron bridge was almost complete. On the following day, the last spike was driven three miles west of the Pecos River. The driving of the silver spike was an important occasion. James Campbell, who had been superintendent of the line east of El Paso, had this to say. "Gentlemen, it is an easy matter for us to come here in our special cars, fitted with all the comforts of life, and carry off the newspaper honors of this great work, but we must not forget those who have borne the brunt of the battle, and the hardships of the field. We must not forget the men...walking on this scorched desert, in a hostile country setting stakes for the vast army of graders."[8]

The officials of the Sunset Route, as this line of the Southern Pacific was called, knew from the beginning that they would have to employ men specifically to watch the track in the vicinity of the Pecos River. Because of the numerous deep cuts, the track was regularly covered by falling rock. Men had to be stationed at strategic points to warn approaching trains. The section crew at Painted Cave station near the Pecos was kept especially busy clearing track and making other repairs. Operating problems on the original route caused the Southern Pacific to seek an alternate route, resulting in the construction of the first Pecos River High Bridge in 1892. The new bridge shortened the line by 11 miles, eliminated a number of curves and steep grades, and the two tunnels. After the tunnels and roadbed was abandoned by the railroad, they were used as wagon roads. The tunnels had a large amount of bat guano in them in later years, but is use as fertilizer was not realized at the time.

Just four months prior to the Pecos River spike driving ceremony, the Mexican Central had completed its line from Juarez to Mexico City. The construction company had imported many workers into Mexico from the southwestern United States, among them a large number of Chinese. The Chinese came first as peons, but stayed on as shopkeepers ad café owners. In Chihuahua, as elsewhere in Mexico, the Orientals quickly adapted themselves to Mexican life and were absorbed by the already Mongoloid mestizo. Chinita became a term of endearment; "China Poblana," Chinese senorita from Puebla, paradoxically the purely Mexican symbol of pulchritude. [9] The Chinese had a drastic setback of their population in Mexico during the Pancho Villa days because of an intense hatred Villa had for the chinos, claiming that they had withheld money from him when he needed it the most, Because of the large number of Mexican and Chinese refugees who were pouring into the United States during the Mexican insurrection, the government ordered a special census of El Paso's population to be taken in 1916. The figures showed the Chinese population at 243, which was an increase of 15 from the 1910 figure. The Chinese population was remaining stable, but aging with the lack of women present. The Chinese community was composed almost entirely of men prior to 1917. The Chinese looked upon intermarriage as a disgrace to their race. Through ostracism of those who did marry outside the race, intermarriage was kept to a minimum. However, with the passage of time and because of the desire for family life, and because of the need to preserve at least a part of the Chinese heritage, the Chinese resorted to intermarriage as a necessary evil. The Chinese no longer have their customs and unity intact. As late as 1931, it was estimated that there were only six descendants of the original Chinese laborers who came to El Paso with the railroad left in the area. The railroads of the United States played a vital role in the development of the west. The Chinese railroaders were instrumental in the building of the rail lines. Even though the early Chinese colony was very small and has since become integrated with other ethnic groups in the El Paso area, the Chinese remain an important part of the multicultural heritage of El Paso.

1. Tung, William L., The Chinese in America 1920-73, New York: Oceana, 1974. **2.** Farrar, Nancy E., "The History of the Chinese in El Paso, Texas: A Case Study of an Urban Immigrant Group in the American West, unpublished M.A. thesis, The University of Texas at El Paso,31970, p. 8. **3.** Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, historical narrative used at Seminole Canyon State Historic Park. **4.** El Paso Times, May 6, 1972**. 5.** Denny, John W., A Century of Freemasonry at El Paso, El Paso**:** Texas Western College, 1956, pp. 45-46. **6.** El Paso Times, January 28, 1978. **7.**Calk, J. P., personal interview, October 16, 1981. *Editor's note: J. P. Calk is the uncle of the author and is the owner of the land on which the tunnels and the campsites are located.* **8.** San Antonio Daily Express, January 18, 1883. **9.** Lister, Florence C. and Robert H. Lister, Chihuahua,

OCTOBER MEETING: Southwest Chapter

The Southwest Chapter met on October 9 at Amigo's Restaurant, Ten people were present, including guests, Ron Leiman and Mark Steele. Vice Chairman Phil Wiborg, conducted the meeting. The special program was postponed because of technical problems. The subject of the program was to be the James Watt, the AT&SF Pullman Car owned by the Chapter. A lively discussion developed around the restoration questions of the James Watt Car. Rick Brightman, discussed some of the potential environmental problems. Prince McKenzie reported that Ron Dawson had applied for a restoration grant.

NEXT MEETING: Ron Leiman, agreed to return and present his documentary "condition report" on the James Watt, Pullman Car. We meet at Amigo's Restaurant at 6 pm and the program starts at 7 pm. Amigo's is located at 2000 Montana Ave., east of Cotton St. Everyone is invited. For more information call Prince McKenzie at (915) 256-4409

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trainweb,org/ep-sw/
index1.htm

MUSEUM NEWS:

The Railroad & Transportation Museum of El Paso has been located at the Texas & Pacific Freight Depot, constructed in 1912. This historic building is an imposing example of Victorian architecture with a Texas Mission influence. For the first time the Museum staff has had enough space to store collections, the library and archives. The staff had designed and began the installation of new exhibits when it became necessary for a financial evaluation of museum operations.

The Railroad Museum has been leasing the building from the property owner. At the same time it has been raising funds for operational expenses. While the Museum has received financial support from several sources including the Southwest Chapter and Freeport McMoRan, it does not have enough income to sustain the museum operations. The Museum has always operated with a volunteer, management staff. Unless more financial support is received from the community, the Museum will be moving out of the T&P Depot at the end of November.

The Museum staff and Board have made arrangements for the storage of exhibit equipment. Meetings with the Insights, Science Center have taken place. The Museum is considering an operating arrangement with the Science Museum which is located a few blocks east of the current location at the T&P Depot.

VISION PARTY:

On Saturday, November 23rd the Museum will have an event for Museum supporters. The Museum board will host a dinner for the purpose of discussing the Museum future operations and fundraising. It will be held at The Network, Downtown Saturday afternoon. Cost will be $30 per person. This is your opportunity to contribute toward the Museum operations and offer your suggestions on how we can preserve and teach railroad and transportation history. The Network is across from the Wells Fargo Bank on Mills Ave. Downtown. Free parking will be available. For more information and reservations, please call Prince McKenzie at (915) 256-4409.