

TRUCKEE'S CHINESE PUZZLE

Newcomers to Truckee soon learn what locals know: that the town once had a sizeable Chinese population. According to the 1870 census, as many as one-half of the total residents were from China. Also known as 'Celestials' (after their so-called 'heavenly kingdom' in China), many thousands of Chinese had come to the shores of California during the gold rush. They came not only to mine the metal like other immigrants, but also to flee the desperate conditions of the 'Tai Ping' Rebellion-- a calamitous civil war then ongoing in their own homeland. They spread to mining camps all over the Sierra, including some in the Truckee area. Some of them also became merchants, professionals, and laborers, and in the process formed the precursors to the later "Chinatowns". Then after the gold supply declined, they faced difficult times like most other settlers. But soon construction of the Transcontinental Railroad was underway --by Presidential decree in 1862-- and a great labor force was needed for the enterprise. After some initial reluctance, the Central Pacific railroad company hired many thousands of unemployed Chinese already in California. And, because they proved to be such good workers, the company also contracted for thousands more to emigrate from China.

But after the railroad was completed-- when the golden spike was driven at Promontory Utah in May of 1869-- the Chinese once again faced hard times, as their labor was no longer needed. With their own country still in dangerous political turmoil, they could not safely return home --so they sought work as laborers of all sorts in America. At this time some 1400 came back to Truckee, where they had worked during a critical phase of railroad construction, seeking jobs as cooks, woodcutters, laundrymen and any sort of menial labor that might be available. Though initially tolerated by white settlers, the strange-looking orientals were soon regarded with resentment and hostility by the Caucasians-- principally, it was claimed, because of their threat to white job-seekers. Thus began a prolonged effort toward expulsion of the Chinese, from Truckee, from California, from the Western United States altogether. With the battle-cry "The Chinese Must Go!" the citizens of various towns and communities organized and implemented schemes for removal of the Chinese. But because violent means were deemed both dangerous and illegal-- inciting possible retaliation from armed Chinese and attracting unwanted attention of Federal law enforcement-- peaceful methods would have to be developed.

It was Charles F. McGlashan of Truckee, businessman, attorney, newspaper editor and town father, who proposed a solution: a resolute and thorough boycott of all Chinese merchants and

laborers, and of all white merchants who themselves did any business with the Chinese. Under McGlashan's plan, the Chinese would simply be "starved out", and their Caucasian employers would be boycotted as well. Over a period of several months, beginning in late 1885, the boycott was implemented, and by February of 1886 was declared a success. Without work, money, supplies or business of any kind, the Chinese began leaving in droves-- as reported throughout January of 1886 by McGlashan's newspaper, the Truckee Republican-- on foot, in wagons, by stagecoach and railway, back to coastal cities, and thence, presumably, back to China. By February 3, the paper opened a series of announcements with the declaration that "The departure of the Chinese being a fixed fact...", and proceeded to state that "The first war cry bows to the victorious cry of triumph" in the campaign to expel the Chinese.

So successful was the boycott that it became known throughout the West as "The Truckee Method", and soon other towns were implementing their own versions of it. These were often celebrated with a torchlight parade, as had been held by the white citizens of Truckee. On February 13, the Truckee Republican declared: "Tonight we rejoice not only over our own success, but over the success attending the efforts of the entire coast, in getting forever rid of the accursed blot..."

And on February 17 reported that "Truckee was a blaze of light...[We are] confident that the entire

work will, in a few days at most, be accomplished wholly and entirely."

Finally, on March 31, after the town had celebrated with a grand finale of "Bonfires, Torches and Enthusiasm", the newspaper proclaimed:

"Monday night [March 29] was, and will ever remain, a red-letter night in the history of the Chinese movement... Truckee feels proud of her assigned position, as the banner town of the Golden State."

As Truckee historian Guy Coates surmised [SS 12/4/2002]:

"Over the first two months of 1886, McGlashan and other town leaders succeeded in getting every business in town to refuse to sell anything to the Chinese. As food and other supplies dwindled in their community, many Chinese had no other recourse than to leave town. By the end of February the 'Truckee Method' of forcing the Chinese away was declared a success by its leaders."

But despite early newspaper reports, certain difficulties with the storyline appear in the telling. These involve the alleged success of the Truckee Method, and its supposedly non-violent nature, both of which the general trend of historical accounts tends to affirm. Further research in fact reveals some serious inaccuracies in the reporting, along with glaring contradictions in the accounts, and significant omissions from the narrative. These features become quite puzzling in light of other sources of information which have emerged; they occur in the characterizations of the Chinese people

themselves, the nature of the expulsion, and in the actual chronicling of events.

Newspapers frequently described the Chinese in the most deprecating and disparaging of terms-- they were depicted as dirty, dishonest, lazy and unlawful; their dwellings are usually described as dank hovels, shacks, and firetraps; all manner of misdeeds are attributed to them, and they are blamed for nearly every mishap in the white community. Yet other reliable sources just as frequently confute these depictions, and describe the Chinese as clean, decent, hard-working, honorable and dependable. Some examples:

On one hand, the Truckee Republican, in describing Chinese dwellings in November of 1877, reported a visit to Chinatown as

"a casual call upon the denizens who inhabit the filthy pens constructed above and a little back of our main row..."

And in November of 1878, urging the removal of Chinatown away from the white neighborhood, the newspaper referred to "...the hovels of the Chinese, with their filth, stench, pestilence, prostitution and gambling...", and further advised, "... do not permit them to build fire rafts in the very heart of town..."

On the other hand, James Strobridge, the head foreman of the Central Pacific Railroad construction, who had supervised thousands of Chinese laborers for several years, stated that "...they are very cleanly in their habits. When the Chinese came off

the road, they filled their little tubs made from powder kegs, took a hot sponge bath, and changed clothes before their evening meal..." [George Krause, HIGH ROAD TO PROMONTORY, p. 111]

These observations are affirmed by Senator George Hart, whom Lillian Ninnis records in THEY STAYED CHINESE as saying, in 1867, that "the Chinese are a very clean people; I say so understandingly, because I have traveled with them" and that they frequently "thoroughly washed themselves", which the Senator confesses "was far more than I did".

And concerning their dwellings, it seems they were clean and well-constructed whenever the Chinese were afforded the opportunity. From December of 1878, newspaper reports now ironically describe a new Chinatown construction:

"The houses are of a uniform appearance, and the new town will present a very creditable aspect. The houses are neat, because new, and some are decidedly aristocratic."

This contention is graphically supported by evidence of the time: [\[see picture?\]](#)

"Photos of the period show the new community's buildings to be on par with many of the rest of the town's buildings, not just shacks." [Guy Coates, SS 12/4/2002; The Mystery Behind Truckee's Chinese Herb Shop]

Then, concerning their moral character, reporters of the day complained, that in addition to the hazards and nuisances posed to Truckee, Chinese society

reputedly harbored a criminal underground. The Truckee Republican regularly described the Chinese in such terms, and Marilou West Ficklin sums up these sentiments in the book TRUCKEE, recording the statement of one Will Edwards... writing on March 23, 1876:

“Truckee is infested by a regularly organized band of Chinese thieves and housebreakers. It is not alone hen roosts, wood sheds and kitchens that are robbed; it is store houses, freight depots, railroad cars, private houses and even stone and fire proof buildings....The Chinese are taught from their birth that to steal and lie and cheat is right. They are shrewd, cunning and artful. They are thieves and burglars at present, they will become highway robbers and murderers next.”

But again, continuing with PROMONTORY, Kraus records that the Chinese, in comparison with white laborers, principally Irish, were on the whole honest and dependable: Foreman Strobridge pronounced them "the best in the world", then also remarked, "They learn quickly, do not fight, have no strikes that amount to anything...They will gamble, and do quarrel among themselves most noisily-- but harmlessly"

And Kraus further records that railroad boss Leland Stanford, in a report to president Andrew Johnson on October 10, 1865, wrote of the Chinese: "As a class they are quiet, peaceable, patient, industrious and economical..." John R. Gills, civil engineer for the railroad also remarked:

“The Chinese were as steady, hard-working a set of men as could be found.” [Promontory, p.151] E.B. Crocker, in 1865 said: “A large part of our workforce are Chinese and they prove nearly equal to white men in the amount of labor they perform, and are far more reliable.” [Promontory, p.107] And Samuel S. Montague, chief construction engineer, observed: “They are faithful and industrious, and, under proper supervision, soon become skillful in the performance of their duty.” [Promontory, p. 110]

In the booklet, THE CHINESE MUST GO!, author Wallace Hagaman's research led him to the conviction that "Even under duress, they sought to be honorable in their business dealings and to fulfill the contracts they entered into." And in reviewing the Ah Too Trial of 1873, the local Truckee newspaper lately recounted an earlier report that

“The Chinese seem to be as fond of appealing to the law to redress their wrongs and carry out their schemes as white people sometimes are” (SS 9/30/1982)

Thus, regarding the character and habits of the Chinese, two very different narratives are found to exist side by side, one most disparaging, the other quite favorable: How are these perplexing and disparate narratives to be reconciled?

Continuing this inquiry into the narrative of the anti-Chinese movement, the early newspaper accounts become even more troublesome with regard to the process of the expulsion itself. On one hand, the reports insisted on the peaceable conduct of the boycott, and in its voluntary participation by the white merchants, stressing that the Chinese departed only for reasons of economic necessity. There was to be no force, but simply a stricture to withhold employment or business of any kind from them. In November 1885 McGlashan had formed the Boycotting Committee, which on Dec. 5, 1885 issued the resolution:

“Resolved: That not only the laboring man, but the entire community, demand that all individuals, companies and corporations should discharge any and all Chinamen in their employ by January 1, 1886, and refuse thereafter to give them work of any kind.”

And the Truckee Republican immediately affirmed

"This is the only peaceful and lawful solution of the difficulty. Aggressive movements are neither judicious nor advisable."

In light of previously cited reports, the peaceable methods of the boycott seem to have worked.

On the other hand, however, telltale signs of forcible intent become evident upon a closer

reading of the record, as the Truckee Republican declared on January 13, 1886:

"Either the whites will rule and the Chinese must leave, or the Chinese must rule and the whites will leave"

Jean Pfaelzer in *DRIVEN OUT* records a mood of growing hostility shortly after the Boycotting Committee's December resolution: "At midnight, men thronged the streets, bearing torches and shouting, 'The Chinese must go!' ". Pfaelzer further reveals, "McGlashan declared, 'there will be no compromise, no flag of truce, no cessation of hostilities until the final surrender is made'...and vowed that as of Friday, January 15, Truckee would face 'a bitter, relentless warfare unto the death' ". Those who continued to patronize the Chinese, he threatened, 'are known and will be dealt with accordingly.' "

Such reports have indeed led some present-day researchers to doubt the veracity of the wholly 'peaceful' repute of the Truckee Method. Hagaman, in *THE CHINESE MUST GO!*, observed that "By November 1885, tension between Chinese and whites had increased and several Truckee citizens were calling for the removal---forcibly, if necessary---of all Chinese". Pfaelzer, too, could only surmise that "McGlashan abandoned his 'nonviolent' strategy. And Scott Lankford, in *TAHOE BENEATH THE SURFACE*, is even more incisive: "In truth, the secret behind the Truckee Method's success was the implicit threat of violence should

the terms of the boycott be broken. The noted scholar Alexander Saxton sums up these suspicions in *THE INDISPENSABLE ENEMY*: "Truckee, like Eureka, emphasized the nonviolence of its anti-Chinese campaign... There was, in both cases, however, an accompaniment of threats of violence in case of non-compliance" --as McGlashan seems to have indicated.

And yet the same McGlashan had promoted the boycott expressly as a means of deterring mob violence, not only in Truckee, but throughout the State, and on several occasions personally interceded on behalf of Chinese welfare.

As to the reliability of the actual dates, circumstances and sequence of events, there is widespread confusion and contradiction in the reporting. For example, it is frequently claimed that the boycott was a complete success, that by mid-February, 1886, most of the Chinese had left, and that certainly before the end of March, all the Chinese had left. Often-cited evidence includes a Truckee Republican report from April 8, 1891:

"It may seem strange but it is a fact, nevertheless, that there are children in Truckee from six to eight years old who do not remember ever having seen a Chinaman. It is over five years since the celestials left this town."

--meaning, essentially, that they all had left before April of 1886.

Hagaman, as well, relates that McGlashan wrote in 1893: "Few of the seven-year-old children of Truckee ever saw a Chinaman. Prior

to eight years ago there were 2,000 Chinese in the Truckee Basin; since, not one. They were not driven out by force but simply starved out. The citizens rose up as one man and discharged every single Celestial....Not one has been in sight of Truckee for a day, an hour, or a moment since March of 1886. No Chinaman will ever again be employed in the region." [pp. 55-56, *THE CHINESE MUST GO!*]

In a Sierra Sun article, *OVERALL ATMOSPHERE ALLOWED EXPULSION* [8/26/77], Doug Barrett concisely chronicles the expulsion, and sets the consensus from newspaper sources of early 1886:

"The first meeting of the anti-Chinese society here took place around Thanksgiving of 1885. By Chinese New Year, in mid-February, 1886, its immediate goal had been largely achieved. By Feb. 2, the bay city papers reported that there were but 20 Chinese in the woods or in Truckee's Chinatown who were being paid wages. And Barrett concludes in another article [3/26/81, SS]: "... Economic pressures and concentrated hostility in early 1886 drove the last vestiges of the local Chinese colony away so thoroughly that for generations no Chinese would be found in or near this town."

Guy Coates likewise affirms the early 1886 date: "By the end of February the 'Truckee Method' of forcing the Chinese away was declared a success by its leaders." [Sierra Sun, 12/4/2002]

Finally, the recent local publication, 125 YEARS OF HISTORY [(TDHS) April 28, 1988], concludes the story with the oft-repeated declaration: **“Within five weeks, all 2,000 Chinese were gone from the area.”**

Unfortunately for adherents to this version of history, these statements are directly contradicted by other, fully credible accounts. Foremost among these is the report on the Chinatown fire of late June, 1886 by the Truckee Republican:

Chinatown Burned, but the County Bridge Saved

“It was but a little after twelve o’clock on Thursday, when the dreaded fire whistles from the yard engine, announced that somewhere there was a fire in progress. It took but a moment to locate it in Chinatown, and the entire population were out at once.”

Hagaman notes, appropriately, "This incident was evidence that there were still Chinese remaining in Truckee five months after the boycott had officially been called a success."

Other reports periodically surfaced regarding a stubborn 'post-expulsion' Chinese presence in Truckee. The persistence of one 'Fong Lee', prominent businessman and Chinese community leader is related by Hagaman: "That he continued to reside in Truckee after the boycott is evidenced by a report in the Nevada City *Daily Transcript* that he was badly cut and his queue cut off while walking on Jibboom Street in April of 1887." Hagaman further records an incident of sabotage in

Chinatown over a year after the 'expulsion', as reported in the *Sacramento Union* on April 8, 1887:

"The water tank erected by the Chinamen last year at a cost of several hundred dollars and which supplied Chinatown with all of its water privileges, was blown up last night with a dynamite cartridge".

Still more remaining Chinese are reported in the Truckee Republican of June 22, 1887:

Anti-Chinese Meeting

“It was reported that there were 48 Chinamen working for the Railroad Company at Cold Stream. A committee of three was appointed to draw up a remonstrance and present to the Railroad Company. The committee consisted of Messrs. McGlashan, Gage and Lewison. It was also decided to place an iron-clad boycott on Oliver Lonkey until he discharge his Chinese cook.” Hagaman feels compelled to concede: "Isolated incidents reported in newspapers during the following months and years, makes it apparent that not all of the Chinese left the Truckee Basin as a result of the boycott." [op. cit. p.51]

Particularly prominent among the historical inconsistencies are those involving the firm Sisson, Crocker & Co. The *Nevada City Daily Transcript* reported in early 1886:

"Most of the employers have agreed to discharge their Chinese employees. Sisson, Crocker & Co., who have large contracts, agree to discharge the Chinese working in their store at once, and to discharge their woodchoppers on May 1st."

Again, 125 YEARS OF HISTORY declares: "The Chinese economic strength was finally destroyed in a general boycott during 1885-86 of the firm Sisson, Crocker & Company."

Barrett [SS 8/26/77] also relates that [By February 2nd 1886] "... Van Arsdale and W.H. Kruger reported from a trip to San Francisco that they had succeeded in getting the Sisson, Crocker contracts with the Chinese labor brokers rescinded. The last holdout had surrendered." And Hagaman further records: "In May 1886, less than 90 days after the torchlight parade celebrated the end of the boycott...Sisson and Crocker sold interests in the Company to Truckee Lumber Company."

All such pronouncements, however, are entirely refuted by the contents of an old Sisson, Crocker & Co. commercial ledger, *from the year 1886*, which has recently come into the possession of the Truckee Donner Historical Society. In its 400 pages are listed all the business transactions conducted that year by this company with local merchants and individuals, including *many transactions with Chinese!* These continue on past the boycott, and the reputed compliance of this company with the boycott, through the March expulsion deadline, all the way into *late November*. Not only were Chinese merchants still active in Truckee throughout 1886, but Sisson-Crocker was doing business with them.

And the problem by no means ends there. In TALES OF TAHOE, David J. Stollery Jr. recounts that "a

hundred or so" Chinese laborers were hired from Truckee to construct a Toll Road along the west shore of Lake Tahoe, and that "The year was 1893" --some seven years after the 'successful' boycott.

Then, in commenting on the famous 'Four Chefs' photograph, which today adorns a bar room wall at a local Truckee bistro, The Sierra Sun [7/21/83] provided the following caption:

"This photograph was taken about 1900 in Herbert McKay's newly built Whitney House (now the Truckee Hotel) on Bridge Street. The Chinese cooks were lined up in the dining room and photographed from behind what is now the bar of the Passage restaurant."

Finally, in a University of Nevada Oral History Program interview, Italian immigrant Joseph Mosconi vividly recalls the formation of an *ad hoc* posse in his neighborhood to round up and expel nearby Chinese. The Mosconi family did not settle in Truckee *until 1905*.

Thus once again, there are two very different storylines, this time regarding both the conduct of the boycott and the date of departure of the Chinese. On one hand, the commonly accepted storyline has been carefully culled from early newspaper reports and published statements from various organizations and prominent citizens of the time. On the other hand, certain original documents, photographs, living recollections and railroad records seem to draw a very different picture-- entirely incompatible with the former. It is as though pieces of two different puzzles have been

co-mingled, or that some pieces have been removed, altered, or fabricated altogether. This poses a real dilemma for historians: which storyline is true? Did the Chinese all leave in early 1886, or remain for many years or even decades? Was their departure altogether peaceful, or was violence involved? How could the Chinese have been both "filthy", and "a very clean people", at the same time? How could they live in "hovels" and also in "neat" "aristocratic" houses at once? How could they characteristically have been both "criminal" and "honorable" at the same time?

What really happened in Truckee? Why are some of the records missing? How can the numerous conflicting accounts be assembled into a single consistent historical narrative? There seems to be an alternate reality here-- underlying many layers of obfuscation, not yet fully uncovered-- one needing much further study. This is Truckee's 'Chinese Puzzle'.

In many other ways the Chinese presence had a beneficial effect on Caucasian Society:

AFTERWORD

Regardless of the accuracy of the various reports on the Chinese presence and departure from Truckee, one point is undeniable: the Chinese made enormous contributions to the development of civilization in the American West. Beginning with the gold rush, due to the prejudicial enactment and application of the Foreign Miners' Tax, the Chinese actually paid the majority of the revenue collected by the State of California during its formative years, thus significantly ensuring the success of the early government.

Their labor and sacrifice in construction of the Transcontinental Railroad must stand as one of the greatest engineering works of all time, which so greatly enabled travel, transportation and commerce for settlers of all races. Concerning this project, E.B. Crocker declared in a speech in Sacramento: "I wish to call to 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". And in testifying before a congressional committee, Vice President of the Southern Pacific RR David D. Colton stated: "I do not think that the railroad would have been done as quickly, and with anything like the same amount of certainty as to what we were going to accomplish in a given length of time". [CHARLIE CROCKER'S PETS, (E Clampus Vitus)]

Their traditional gardening skills supplied fresh produce to the entire community in a climate where white European farming techniques had failed. Traditional Chinese medical practice formed a valuable adjunct to Western medicine, and on numerous occasions could intercede where the latter had also failed-- Leland Stanford's own wife was restored to health, after unsuccessful Caucasian treatments for an otherwise fatal illness, by a Chinese herbal doctor.

Chinese dependably supplied labor for tasks that whites frequently refused (despite complaints to the contrary), and in particular contributed to the overall hygiene of white settlements through employment as launderers, dishwashers, and general cleaning services (again despite reports to the contrary). And due to their culinary expertise, the survival of the iconic 'Chinese cook' provided service throughout the Truckee basin well into the 20th century.

It is shameful that the Chinese, who bestowed such benefits, should have been so rudely treated. And it is tragic that McGlashan, while heading the Caucasian League in the effort to channel public outcry into lawful action, could not somehow accommodate the potential long-term value to white society of these skillful, colorful, industrious immigrants who shared in so much of the life of early California.

This article is extracted from a much larger work of research, begun in August 2013, and still in progress.

Author: Stephen Harris, active member, Truckee-Donner Historical Society, June 2015

Stephen Harris
High Sierra Herb Garden
P.O. Box 223 Truckee CA 96160

stephenh321@gmail.com

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