A HISTORY OF THE CHINESE IN CALIFORNIA

EARLY CHINESE LABORERS AND CONSTRUCTION WORKERS

In the early years of American California there were few Chinese engaged in the various occupations. Apparently there were some shoemakers, tailors, cooks and general laborers. Others were employed in the building trades.

At that time, due to the tremendous population influx, there was a great housing shortage in California. Because of the lack of local manufacturing facilities, prefabricated houses were imported, many from China. One correspondent wrote: [The Chinese houses] "... are the prettiest, the best made and the cheapest ..." Many Chinese were employed to erect the houses. Again another wrote: "... From early morn until late in the evening these industrious men are engaged in their occupation of house builders, of which a great number have been exported from China ..."

Chinese stone masons and laborers brought from China under contract were used to erect a granite building [the Parrott Building] at California and Montgomery Streets. Their hours of labor were from sunrise to sunset with one hour off for lunch. Daily allowance for each man was one-half pound of rice and one-fourth pound of fish or equivalent. Pay was one dollar per day of work. The contract was for ninety days.

One reporter observed: "[These Chinese] ... appear to be a very steady, sober and industrious set, apparently slow but sure. They calculate with great exactness and nicety, and turn out their work handsomely ..." The writer went on to note that the Chinese used a scaffolding "made of small poles and bamboos, which are fastened together by small withes ..."

As the population in San Francisco and California increased, more local construction talent was made available. Chinese construction workers gradually faded into the background, although there was still scattered mention in later years of their being used in building construction.

THE RAILROADS

BEFORE THE CENTRAL PACIFIC

The January 4, 1855, issue of the Oriental contained an editorial entitled "Laborers for the Pacific Railroad," in which it was confidently predicted that the time will come when "the boundless plateaus of the Western half of this continent, now desolate and almost unpopulated by any but the savage and scarce (sic) improvable destroyers of the buffalo, will be scattered with busy lines of Chinese builders of iron roads, that shall link the two oceans, and add to the wealth and comforts of the dwellers upon either shore."

One of the earliest employment of Chinese for railroad building was on the construction of the California Central Railroad. In 1858 the Sacramento Union printed this item:

"It was contemplated to extend the [California Central Railroad] to Marysville without any unnecessary delay. ..." [The contractors] resorted to hiring Chinamen to fill the places of those who left [for the gold fields of the Fraser River]; the result is that they now have some fifty Chinamen employed, and they find them very good working hands. They do not work as rapidly as the white men, but they keep constantly at it from sunrise until sunset. The experiment bids fair to demonstrate that Chinese laborers can be profitably employed in grading railroads in California. ..."

In 1869, Henry George asserted that Chinese
laborers were also used in the construction of the San Jose Railroad in 1860.2

START OF THE TRANSCONTINENTAL RAILROAD

On January 8, 1863, with a ground-breaking ceremony at Sacramento, the Central Pacific Railroad finally started work on the western end of the long talked about transcontinental railroad. The terrain over which this railroad was to be built was so rough that the prevailing opinion in Washington, D. C., was that the Central Pacific, confronted at the start with the rugged Sierra Nevada, going from nearly sea level to more than 7,000 feet altitude within 100 miles, would be fortunate to reach the eastern border of California before it is met by the Union Pacific coming from the East.

WHY CHINESE WERE HIRED

Two years after the beginning of construction, the line had completed less than 50 miles of running track. Central Pacific's construction superintendent, J. H. Strobridge, needed 5,000 laborers "for constant and permanent work." But the largest force that he was able to muster at any time during the spring of 1865 was 800.

E. B. Crocker, brother of Charles Crocker, was one of the first to suggest that the way to solve the railroad's manpower problem was to use Chinese for the construction work.3 At this time it was a period of recession in the mines. Chinese ex-miners were seeking employment in other endeavors in towns and the countryside at low wages.4 However, when Central Pacific General Superintendent Charles Crocker suggested several times that Chinese be hired, his Irish construction superintendent, J. H. Strobridge, resisted strenuously: "I will not boss Chinese. I will not be responsible for work done on the road by Chinese labor." He just did not think Chinese were fit laborers for building a railroad.5

However, events forced Strobridge to change his mind. Labor was as scarce and as unreliable as ever. The desperate superintendent finally decided to experiment by hiring fifty Chinese from the vicinity, restricting them to the simple work of filling dump carts. This was in February 1865.6

The Chinese proved so adept at this task that they were soon given the duty of driving the carts as well as loading them. Next, though doubting that they were capable of really hard physical labor, he tried them using picks on softer excavations, with excellent results.6

Strobridge now began to hire in earnest. The railroad's agents scoured the towns of California for Chinese laborers. By fall of that year there were 3,000 on the payroll.7 "The number rapidly increased to ten or eleven thousand and from then till the golden spike was placed at Promontory, four men in every five hired by the Central Pacific were Chinese.8 After the supply of local Chinese labor was exhausted, the railroad began recruiting in the Far East.9

HOW THE CHINESE WORKED AND LIVED

Chinese railroad workers were divided into gangs of about 12 to 20 each. Each group had a cook who not only prepared their meals but was required to have a large boiler of hot water each night so that when the workers came off the grade, they could take a hot sponge bath, and change their clothes before the evening meal.10 Each gang had a "head man" who each evening received from the foreman an account of the time credited to his gang and he in turn divided it among the individuals. The head man also bought and paid for all provisions used by his gang, the amount due him being collected from each individual at the end of the month.10

Hours of work were from sunrise to sunset, six days per week.10 Initially, the wages of the Chinese workers were set at one dollar per day or twenty-six dollars per month. Later this was raised to thirty dollars and finally to thirty-five dollars per month, out of which, after deducting their expenses, left $20 to $30 per man.10, 11

Probably on the advice of Chinese merchants, the workers were fed a Chinese diet including dried oysters, dried cuttle fish, dried fish, sweet rice, crackers, dried bamboo, salted cabbage, Chinese sugar, dried fruits and vegetables, vermicelli, dried sea weed, Chinese bacon, dried abalone, dried mushrooms, peanut oil, tea, rice, pork, and poultry. This was a much more varied and balanced diet than the beef, beans, bread, butter and potatoes of white laborers at the time. The Chinese also drank barrels of lukewarm tea brought by Chinese mess attendants. By way of contrast white
workers would not hesitate to gulp down cold water. Too often this water was contaminated and caused illness among the workers. The company provided the Chinese with low cloth tents, but many preferred to live in dugouts or to burrow into the earth.

The Chinese soon set an example for diligence, steadiness, and clean living. They had few fights and no "blue" Mondays. California governor Leland Stanford, also one of the directors of the Central Pacific, said in his report to the president of the United States on October 10, 1865: "As a class they are quiet, peaceable, patient, industrious and economical. Ready and apt to learn all the different kinds of work required in railroad building, they soon became as efficient as the white laborers. . . ."

CAPE HORN PASSAGE

In the fall of 1865 the Chinese laborers of the Central Pacific, derisively called by some, "Crocker's pets," came up against Cape Horn, a nearly perpendicular rocky promontory. At this point the American River is 1,400 feet below the line of the road. Chinese workmen were lowered from the top of the cliff in wicker baskets. The basket men chipped and drilled holes for explosives, and then scrambled up the lines while gunpowder exploded beneath. Inch by inch, a road bed was gouged from the granite.

IN THE HIGH SIERRAS

As Crocker's army progressed into the High Sierras, progress slowed. One year later, the railroad only reached Cisco on the western slope. Snow overtook the Central Pacific crews in December of 1866. That winter was one of the most severe on record. But Crocker ordered the workers to start tunneling Donner Summit.

The Chinese lived practically entirely out of sight of the sky that winter, their shacks largely buried in snow. They dug chimneys and air shafts and lived by lantern light. They tunneled their way from the camps to the portal of the tunnel to work long, underground shifts. A remarkable labyrinth developed under the snow. The corridors in some cases were wide enough to allow two-horse sleds to move through freely, and were as much as 200 feet long. Through them, workmen travelled back and forth, digging, blasting and removing the rubble.

Loss of life was heavy. Snow slides were frequent. On December 25, 1866, the Dutch Flat Enquirer reported that "a gang of Chinamen employed by the railroad were covered up by a snow slide and 4 or 5 died before they could be exhumed. . . . Then snow fell to such a depth that one whole camp of Chinamen was covered up during the night and parties were digging them out when our informant left."

When spring came, Crocker ordered a massive assault on the summit tunnel. Following is his account on the work of his Chinese crews:

"We had a shaft down in the center. We were cutting both ways from the bottom of that shaft . . . [We] got some Cornish miners [from Virginia City] and paid them extra wages. We put them into one side of the shaft . . . and we had Chinamen on the other side. We measured the work every Sunday morning; and the Chinamen without fail, always outmeasured the Cornish miners. . . . The Chinese were skilled in using the hammer and drill; and they proved themselves equal to the very best Cornish miners in that work. They are very trusty; and they are very intelligent, and they live up to their contracts." The tunnel was completed, but before tracks could be laid, winter had closed in again. This winter was, if anything, worse than the one preceding. Years later Strobridge told the following to a federal investigating commission:

"The snow slides carried away our camps and we lost a good many men in these slides; many of them we did not find until the next season when the snow melted."

However, in mid-1868, the Central Pacific finally broke through the Sierra barrier. The true cost in human lives will probably never be known since little records were kept, but it must have been high.

CHINESE STRIKE

Strobridge and Crocker drove their men, especially the Chinese, mercilessly. It is on record that in June 1867, some 2,000 Chinese engaged in tunnel work in the High Sierras went on strike. However, the Chinese had no support from the other workers, and the strike collapsed in one week.
The workers asked for a raise to forty dollars per month. They wanted the workday in the open to be limited to ten hours and that in the tunnels reduced to eight. As one spokesman put it “Eight hours a day good for white men, all the same good for Chinamen.” They also objected to the right of the overseers of the company to either whip them or restrain them from leaving the road when they desired other employment.” This strike so alarmed the railroad that they wired East for several thousand Negroes as replacements.

Across Nevada to Promontory Point

The march across the flat expanses of Nevada was a romp compared to what laid behind in the Sierras. By January 1869, the Central Pacific, averaging almost one mile per day, had reached the Great Salt Lake Basin, while to the east, tracks of the Union Pacific was just emerging from the Rockies.

By late April 1869, the tracks were only fourteen miles from a junction with the Union Pacific and the Central Pacific forces set out to beat the track-laying record just achieved by the Union Pacific workers. On April 28, 1869, while a number of officers from the U. P. and the C. P., several newspaper correspondents, and workers from the rival camp looked on, the Chinese and Irish work force of the Central Pacific laid 10 miles and 56 feet of track in a little less than 12 hours, beating the old U. P. record by more than 2 miles.

The Central Pacific tracks were officially joined to the Union Pacific rails at Promontory Point near Ogden, Utah, on May 10, 1869. There were many eloquent orations on that day but E. B. Crocker was one of the very few to pay any tribute to the role of the Chinese. In a speech at Sacramento he declared: “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.”

The Valley Route to Los Angeles

In December 1869, the Central Pacific launched the construction of a line down the San Joaquin Valley. By 1872 the railhead had reached Goshen. Subsequently, construction of the section from Goshen on south to Los Angeles was turned over to the Southern Pacific which had been acquired by the Central Pacific in 1870.

By 1875 the Southern Pacific was surmounting the Tehachapi Mountains in a line that zig-zagged back and forth up the slopes, running through 17 tunnels to the summit, which was reached by the middle of 1876.

Concurrently in March 1875, 330 Chinese tunnel diggers also started the attack on the last barrier to Los Angeles, the boring of the 6,975-foot-long San Fernando Tunnel, the longest west of the Appalachians. The force soon increased to 1,500 including 1,000 Chinese.

The work force faced an enormously difficult task. The soft soil of the mountain was saturated with water. A blue gray ooze sucked at the shovels. A constant dripping from the ceiling and sides of the tunnel rendered the atmosphere extremely damp and disagreeable. Within the bowels of the earth hundreds of feet below the surface, the stifling heat and dampness made it almost impossible to work. Workers stripped to the waist, perspiration pouring from every pore. The air was so foul that candles burnt but dimly. Laborers passed out with monotonous regularity; cave-ins and accidents took a fearful toll. But the men kept on working. By July 1876 the tunnel had become a reality and on September 5, 1876, Los Angeles was connected to San Francisco by rail giving a tremendous boost to the development of the San Joaquin Valley and the Los Angeles area.

Expansion of the Southern Pacific

From Los Angeles, the railroad pushed on to the Arizona border, reaching it in 1877. Many Chinese laborers perished from the extreme heat when the line was being laid across the Mohave Desert. The work continued through Arizona and New Mexico and extended the tracks of the Southern Pacific to San Antonio, Texas where junction with the tracks coming from the east was effected in 1883. After the construction was finished, many Chinese workers settled in towns such as San Antonio and Tucson along the route.

At the same time as the construction of the Southern Pacific Valley Route, the railroad was also building a line through Gilroy and Soledad, finally reaching San Luis Obispo in 1894. Many Chinese workers were employed.

While the Southern Pacific was expanding