

Asian American Society: An Encyclopedia

Transcontinental Railroads

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Book Title: Asian American Society: An Encyclopedia
Chapter Title: "Transcontinental Railroads"
Pub. Date: 2014
Access Date: October 17, 2014
Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc.
City: Thousand Oaks
Print ISBN: 9781452281902
Online ISBN: 9781452281889
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781452281889.n293>
Print pages: 905-909

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781452281889.n293> *Independent Scholar*

The Transcontinental Railroad (TCRR) in America was the young nation's greatest engineering marvel in the 19th century. It was built from 1863 to 1869 between Sacramento in California and Omaha in Nebraska (1,907 miles), to fulfill the lofty national goal of manifest destiny to connect the Atlantic Ocean with the Pacific Ocean, from sea to shining sea. The Chinese contract laborers, coolies, immensely contributed to the successful construction of the treacherous western segment (690 miles) for Central Pacific Railroad (CPRR).

On July 1, 1862, in the midst of the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln signed the landmark Pacific Railroad Act in Washington, D.C. It set the national stage for an epic rivalry between CPRR and Union Pacific Railroad (UPRR). CPRR raced easterly from Sacramento at the confluence of the American River and Sacramento River in the Central Valley over Sierra Nevada. UPRR raced westerly from Omaha near the Missouri River in the Great Plains over the Rocky Mountains. The TCRR required a supreme effort at massive scale of labor (Chinese and Irish men), material (iron rails and wooden ties), and equipment (steam locomotives and rail cars) for America.

In California, Governor Leland Amasa Stanford, Collis Potter Huntington, Mark Hopkins, and Charles Crocker, a group of CPRR entrepreneurs known as the Big Four, undertook building TCRR through rugged terrain at extreme heights, from an elevation of 30 feet at Sacramento River Delta in Central Valley to 7,013 feet at Truckee Summit in Sierra Nevada, with its granite wall, a short span of 100 miles. On January 8, 1863, Governor Stanford led a groundbreaking ceremony with CPRR in Sacramento, the western terminus of TCRR.

Chinese Laborers

With allure of goldfields, CPRR had a labor shortage to build TCRR. Superintendent James Harvey Strobridge had great difficulty to sustain a stable workforce of white Americans. In January 1864, CPRR hired Foreman Ah Toy and Headman Hung Wah to lead a work gang of 21 men to clear and grub the Dutch Flat–Donner Lake [p. 905 ↓] Wagon Road. After a work experiment with 50 Chinese in February 1865, James Harvey Strobridge reluctantly agreed with President Charles Crocker to hire Chinese

as laborers. In California, CPRR quickly hired Chinese in the communities. In China, for CPRR, labor brokers recruited Chinese men with enticing bills. In July 1865, the first coolies arrived in San Francisco from Hong Kong.

The Chinese hailed mainly from Sze Yup (Si Yi), four counties of Toishan (Taishan), Hoyping (Kaiping), Sunwui (Xinhui), and Yanping (Enping) in Kwangtung (Guangdong) province. The men were peasants who struggled to survive in the lush valleys and rich fields of the Pearl River Delta near South China Sea. During the decaying Ching (Qing) Dynasty, China was in tumultuous chaos as Kwangtung province was swept by myriad wars in First Opium War (1839–42), Second Opium War (1856–60), Taiping (Great Peace) Rebellion (1850–64), and Punti–Hakka Clan Wars (1855–67). In South China, millions were killed in battles, starved in famines, and drowned in floods.

Under these dire circumstances, a diaspora of desperate Chinese left their villages in search of better opportunities in *Gum Saan* (Gold Mountain) in America. During the Gold Rush, the first wave of Chinese arrived in California in 1849. The second wave of Chinese, as coolies, from Hong Kong, arrived on sailboats and steamer ships (by Pacific Mail Steamship Company) in steerage class on sea journeys of two months to the Port of San Francisco, or *Dai Fow*, the Big City. The Six Companies, a benevolent association in San Francisco Chinatown, oversaw the best interests of their countrymen. From San Francisco, they were rapidly ferried on paddle steamers to Sacramento, or *Yee Fow*, the Second City. In earnest, CPRR directed the Chinese to build the TCRR, eastward from Newcastle Gap to Sierra Nevada.

Racial Discrimination

In a racist America, the Chinamen, or Celestials, endured legal and informal discrimination by white Americans. They were considered Sojourners, or *Gum Saan Hok*, temporary guests of Gold Mountain but not as immigrants to become American citizens. They were barred from bringing their wives and children. They were not allowed to marry white women. They were forbidden to testify in court. Hostile white Americans taunted, tormented, and brutalized the Chinese in California. The Chinese disdainfully called white Americans red hair devils.

In a cruel world, they lived in isolated ghettos of Chinatowns. They lived in a claustrophobic bachelor society, a bachelor world of lonely men and boys. They were restricted to menial businesses of laundries, restaurants, and stores or menial labor on mines, farms, and railroads. They were lured into the popular vices of gambling, opium smoking, and prostitution.

On TCRR, white Americans derisively called them Crocker's pets. The Chinese were paid \$30 per month, much less than white Americans. They had to pay for their own foods and lodging. They mailed their meager savings to their loved ones.

Railroad Labor

In work gangs of 20 to 30 men, under supervision of Irish foremen, the Chinese labored to build the Iron Road for CPRR. They bleakly toiled amid the tall redwoods of the foothills and through the hard rock of Sierra Nevada. They performed the most difficult and dangerous work. In the stark wilderness among ravines and rivers, they cleared and grubbed the railway, graded the railroad bed, laid tracks with ties, built earth embankments and trestle bridges, installed telegraph poles and wires, and so on. At Cape Horn above the American River, the Chinese gouged railroad beds to form a granite ledge.

The 15 tunnels in the granite mountain were the worst task for the Chinese. Donner Summit was longest at 1,659 feet and deepest at 124 feet. They used black powder in kegs from California Powder Works and later volatile nitroglycerin dynamite to blast through a craggy terrain. They endured blizzards and high snowdrifts. Over the stony summit of the Sierra Nevada, they labored in the acrid deserts of the Great Basin in Nevada and Utah toward the Great Salt Lake Valley.

At peak of construction, the CPRR workforce had 12,000 Chinese among their 13,500 employees. They were known as the Army of Canton. Many Chinese (one estimate is 1,200) died on TCRR. They succumbed to explosions, avalanches, mudslides, accidents, and diseases. Many forgotten graves of Chinese are scattered along the railroad line.

[p. 906 ↓] Charles Crocker and James Harvey Strobbridge were impressed by the diligent workmanship of the Chinese in their industrious and modest ways. They were deemed reliable and competent with their white American peers. Labor conflicts were very rare with CPRR.

In 1867, Attorney Edward Bryan Crocker said,

Without them, it would be impossible to go on with the work. I can assure you the Chinese are moving the earth and rock rapidly. They prove nearly equal to white in the amount they perform and are far more reliable.

But in one incident, in June 25, 1867, a mass strike occurred on the Sierra Nevada. They called for higher wages, \$40 per month, and shorter working hours. Charles Crocker withheld their food from them. After one week of starvation, they relented and returned to work under threat of a stern posse.

Work Camp Life

Under adverse conditions for four years, the Chinese encountered the chilly winters of the Sierra Nevada and the scorching summers of the vast Great Basin desert. They relentlessly toiled six days per week, from dawn to dusk. They dressed in indigo frocks and loose trousers with straw hats and leather boots with queues, a Manchu hairstyle mandated by the sovereign of Imperial China.

An Irish foreman supervised each Chinese work gang. A headman, who spoke English, collected the wages and ordered the supplies for his countrymen. A cook organized all meals for the work gang.

In the morning, the cook daily prepared a simple breakfast of congee and dried fruits. In the evening, he prepared a nutritious dinner. On Sunday, he delighted them with a sumptuous feast. The cook prepared aromatic Cantonese meals with rice or vermicelli, jumbled with fresh pork, duck, chicken, and sausage. He supplemented the meals with dried cuttlefish, oyster, abalone, shrimp, scallops, squid, and soybean cakes. With

peanut oil in a wok, the cook stir-fried them with pickled vegetables, dried mushrooms, bamboo shoots, seaweed, and spices.

Under primitive conditions, they celebrated traditional holidays, Spring Festival (New Year), Qing Ming (ancestral worship), and Mid-Autumn Festival (harvest) with incense sticks. During idle times, they frantically gambled at *Fan Tan* (a counting game), *Pai Kow* (dominoes), and *Pak Kop Piu* (lottery). They leisurely smoked opium to relieve the raw tedium and sorrowful angst. They tenderly reminisced and wrote letters to their loved ones. They lived in flimsy canvas tents in groups of eight. Before dinner, they sponged bath from hot water tubs and changed to fresh clothes. They always drank lukewarm tea. They treated their ailments with herbs. In this austere environment, camaraderie prevailed among the men in the work camps.

Completion

As CPRR raced easterly from the Sierra Nevada and UPRR raced westerly from the Rocky Mountains across the desert of the Great Basin, they fervently built the railroad tracks to connect in Utah. America was thrilled by the tremendous race between the two powerful railroad companies. Their competition was ferocious with high tension as federal subsidies and land grants were at stake.

In a wager of \$10,000 from Thomas Clark Durant, UPRR Vice President Charles Crocker ordered a gang of eight Irish tracklayers and 1,200 Chinese laborers, for bonus pay, to lay 10 miles of tracks in one day, near Rozel. From 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., in 12 hours on April 28, 1869, they achieved a new world record. Charles Crocker won his bet.

On May 10, 1869, CPRR and UPRR connected at Promontory Summit north of Great Salt Lake near Ogden in Utah. In a well-choreographed ceremony with dignitaries and laborers, CPRR Jupiter locomotive met UPRR Number 119 locomotive. An Irish crew from UPRR laid the second to last pair of rails. For CPRR, eight Chinese laid the last pair of rails. With hammers, Charles Crocker and Thomas Clark Durant pounded on the ceremonial Golden Spike. At that moment, a telegraph cable was transmitted that said, "Done" across America.

After the festive ceremony, in his private train car, James Harvey Strobridge honored the Chinese from Victory Camp in a reception where he praised them. In rostrum of the Assembly in Sacramento, Edward Bryant Crocker said:

[p. 907 ↓] 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.

At end of TCRR, the Chinese left to build new railroads in the vast hinterlands of the Far West. Others returned to Chinatowns to work. The fortunate ones, Gold Mountain men, returned to their villages with yellow eagles—American gold coins.

A centennial (1969) plaque at Promontory Monument reads: “To commemorate this centennial of the First Transcontinental Railroad in America and to pay tribute to the Chinese workers of the Central Pacific Railroad whose indomitable courage made it possible.”

The Chinese laborers of Central Pacific Railroad left a magnificent legacy of monumental achievement in Gold Mountain. The peasants of Sze Yup in the Pearl River Delta intrepidly labored on the Iron Road from Sacramento to Promontory Summit from 1865 to 1869. They endured racial discrimination and harsh conditions. Nevertheless, the Chinese from the Army of Canton built the Transcontinental Railroad in America.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781452281889.n293>

See Also:

- [Chinese Immigration](#)
- [Discrimination](#)
- [Gold Mining](#)
- [Immigration \(Overview\)](#)
- [Racism](#)

Further Readings

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