

Gum San: The Early Chinese Immigrants to America

By: Dennis Kirson

During the mid-1800s, China's southern Guangdong Province was in turmoil. Guangdong, along with its capital, Canton, was a hotbed of rebellion against the Manchu Dynasty, which, 200 years earlier, had invaded China from Manchuria, conquered the nation, and replaced the Ming Dynasty. Famine and the destruction of crops during periodic rebellion against the government resulted in the deaths of millions of people.

Opium smuggled into China by British traders was also wrecking thousands of Chinese lives. When the Chinese government tried to enforce an embargo on opium shipments, the British government attacked China, forcing the Chinese to consent to the trade. In 1847, British banks cut off funding to businesses in Guangdong for over a year throwing 100,000 men out of work.

In 1848, when gold was found at Sutter's Mill in California, a Chinese man living there wrote to a friend in Canton about the discovery. Soon everyone in Guangdong was talking about *Gum San*, where a person could pick up gold nuggets off the ground. Desperate husbands, fathers, and sons grasped at the rumors of *Gum San* and the Chinese gold rush was on.

Generally the plan was to find enough gold in *Gum San* so that the family back home in Guangdong could live comfortably. Once the Chinese prospector [*gum san hock*] achieved this goal, he would return to live in luxury in China.

But when the Chinese came to the goldfields, the Chinese miners were so efficient at mining that their white neighbors became jealous and began restricting the mining rights of the Chinese. White mobs were known to loot, burn, and even blow up Chinese camps. Short-lived anti-Chinese organizations, such as the Black Hills mining district's Caucasian League and Miners Union, emerged in the mining camps, with their mission "to protect the interests of white miners." Chinese in the cities and towns were also victims of murder and crime.

Some of these miners shifted gears and found jobs with the Central Pacific Railroad, which was building the transcontinental railroad from the west. Central Pacific recognized that the Chinese worked faster, better and for lower wages than the white workers did. Their expertise in explosives and working on cliffs also made building the railroad less costly. But on May 10, 1869, when the Union Pacific and Central Pacific railroads were joined from east to west at Promontory, UT, to create the transcontinental railroad, the Chinese were out of a job.

Chinese prospectors and businessmen spread throughout the West. Wherever there was a new strike, the Chinese made their way to that mining district ~~ CA, AZ, NV, MT, ID, WA, CO, and SD. The predominantly white population developed prejudices against the Chinese based on their

different language, work ethic, dress, and culture ~~ all causing friction. To lessen hard feelings against them, the Chinese began to work old placer mines that whites believed were useless. They also opened businesses that held little conflict with whites, such as restaurants and stores carrying Asian goods.

Another successful way that they made money was by opening laundries. Think about it ~~ a large population of young, dirty, hungry miners with excess cash or gold dust. These men did not waste their time cleaning their clothes and cooking their food, they were there to find gold. The Chinese laundry operators were also pretty clever. They saved the wash water from the miners' clothes and sluiced it, recovering gold dust ~~ in other words, they mined the miners.

The Chinese were also employed in a wide variety of positions including house servants, private cooks, barbers, physicians, lumberjacks, prostitutes, and gamblers. They owned real estate, including hotels and opium dens. Some Chinese even became cowboys.

What limited census figures there were indicated 10 or more Chinese males for every female, so there was a large population of single Chinese men. After Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, these men had even less of a chance of finding spouses. The act cut off almost all new immigration to the US from China. As the men became older and were unable to send for their wives or marry within their race, the Chinese population of the US declined.

Cut off from traditional family and female companionship, the young Chinese males turned to many of the same pastimes as their white neighbors, including drinking, camaraderie ~~ male and female ~~ and most of all, gambling. Mark Twain quipped about the Chinese, "Every third Chinaman runs a lottery." The Chinese bet on everything. Some of their favorite betting games included poker, fan-tan, and white pigeon ticket, also known as the Chinese Lottery. The Chinese Lottery was also popular with whites, who bought tickets, even though they couldn't identify the Chinese characters. Apparently, any bad feelings some whites may have had towards the Chinese didn't extend to gambling; they believed the Chinese were honest enough to give them the correct winnings. The Chinese Lottery eventually evolved into the game of keno.

A number of Chinese also used opium, which was legal to sell and use during the early years. Opium den owners simply bought a government license, the same as saloon owners. Most Chinese smoked opium for medicinal purposes or pleasure. But non-Chinese also ventured into the Chinese opium dens to experiment with the drug. At almost any time of day or night, forms of men and women were stretched out perfectly unconscious of their surroundings, reveling in the pleasant dreams that the devilish narcotic brings to them for one brief hour. [Readers of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle know that Sherlock Holmes frequented London's Chinatown opium dens.] Congress finally outlawed opium use in 1909.

Many Chinese had provisions in their contracts with the companies that brought them to America, that if they died here, the contract companies would ship their bones back to China. After the body had been in the ground for two or three years, their bones were dug up, wrapped in newspaper or cloth, placed in zinc-lined boxes and shipped back to China. Since not many Chinese formed families, not only did the Chinese presence in the American west slowly vanish thanks to the Chinese Exclusion Act, but their cemeteries also vanished.

Single Chinese women were almost always prostitutes or servants. Thousands of young Chinese girls, possibly hundreds of thousands, were brought over to America after being sold as servants by Mainland Chinese families. Instead, once here, they were forced into prostitution in brothels and mining camps across the American Midwest. Theirs was a fate worse than death. Because they were so cheap to bring over and the control over their lives was so complete, they had a brief, violent life in North America. Many took their own lives, died in "hospitals" [out of sight or out of mind], or were killed by the brutality of the camps. Their average life in the country was five years before they succumbed to suicide, violence or disease. It is unfortunate young Asian-Americans are not educated about the plight of these women and this dark chapter of forced slavery in American history.

Sometimes there was a happy ending. Lalu Nathoy [this is a Chinese name?]; a Shanghai-born Chinese girl certainly qualifies. Legend has it that her destitute parents sold her, after which she wound up a dance hall hostess called Polly ~~ basically a slave ~~ in Warrens, ID, in the early 1870s. Her fortune turned when her Chinese owner used her to sweeten the pot in a poker game with saloon owner Charles Bemis. Charlie won Polly and began keeping domestic with her. They married in 1894. At Charlie's death in 1922, they'd been together, faithfully, more than 50 years ~~ thanks to some lucky cards in a poker game.

Donaldina Cameron [1869-1968], "Chinatown's Angel," a San Francisco missionary, was instrumental in intervening in the "Yellow Slave Trade." She ran a rescue mission for young Chinese girls to try and save them from being sold into prostitution. Through her efforts, thousands of disenfranchised Chinese young women reclaimed their lives. The Donaldina Cameron House continues her mission to this day.

It is an issue that still exists today ~~ primarily across the China-Burma border and across the Taiwan Strait. I remember one incident when I was living in Taipei. An ROC Coast Guard ship sighted a Fujian smuggling vessel. As they approached the vessel, more than a dozen young women, bound together and weighted down, were tossed overboard. As Coast Guardsmen dove into the waters to save the women, the smuggling vessel escaped across the centerline of the Strait. Only bodies were recovered. Taiwanese and Communist Chinese authorities cooperated in identifying the victims and returning their bodies to their families on the Mainland. Too bad they cannot cooperate enough to prevent this slave trade.