

Idaho's Chinese Pioneers

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The Chinese came seeking a "Mountain of Gold"

Suppose you were a prospector out hunting for gold in Idaho one hundred and forty years ago. If you met other miners, the chances are they would be Chinese. They would be dressed like the man in the picture on page 3. They would do many things that you would think strange. Of course, the Chinese thought that white people did many strange things. In China they had learned that white men were "foreign devils." It took a lot of courage for them to come thousands of miles from China to be miners in Idaho.

The Chinese who came to Idaho did not like to live away from home. In fact, when they left home, they thought they would be back in a few years. Years later, many of the Chinese miners found

that they really could not get back to China after all. If they did not get back while living, they at least wanted their bones sent home to China.

Why did anyone want to come all the way from China to mine in Idaho? Why, in 1870, did more Idaho miners come from China than from any other place? At the time of the California gold rush, stories of great wealth reached the British colony of Hong Kong. People in nearby China heard many stories about mining in the United States. They learned that the United States was a "mountain of gold." A mountain of gold was just what they needed right then. Around Canton, the main Chinese city near Hong Kong, many families did not earn enough to get by. Getting by did

GLOSSARY

Life of ease: life without usual hardships

Census: official count for the number of people in an area

Placers: mining deposits



Oke Kee family portrait

Idaho City, 1906. ISHS 75-189.3

Chinese participated in gardening, cooking, clothes washing... and railroad construction, too

not take very much, really. Wages that no one in California would think of working for let Chinese live a life of ease in Canton. Thousands of Chinese, then, came to the United States to the mountain of gold. They were not prospectors, but they hoped to mine enough to keep their families back home from starving.

Families in China were very close. A man would do almost anything to help his family. He would even go to work in strange, distant lands. Some went to Singapore and other places in Southeast Asia. Others came to mine in Idaho.

Chinese workers who came to the west coast of North America did more than just mine. Some washed clothes for people. Others raised gardens or cooked meals. A number of Chinese in Silver City carried water to people's houses. For twenty years, they had the only water system in town. Many jobs that no one else wanted were jobs taken by the Chinese. They worked hard, often for very low wages, because a little money would go a long way in China. Thousands of Chinese men were brought in to build the Central Pacific Railroad across California and Nevada. When it was completed in 1869 many came north to the Idaho gold fields, where earlier Chinese miners were already at work. According to the 1870 census, Idaho had 3,853 Chinese miners and only 2,719 white miners. Altogether, 4,269 Chinese (almost all of them men) lived in Idaho in 1870.

Most, but not all, of the Chinese listed in the 1870 census had names starting with "Ah." On Granite Creek, for instance, there were Chinese miners named Ah

Saw, Ah Wait, Ah Say, Ah You, Ah Pooh and Ah Yet. Names like these go on for page after page in the census. White men who did not speak Chinese thought that "Ah" was a very common first name. Actually, Chinese family names come first, followed by what we call first names. However, "Ah" is not a family name either. If it were, most of the Idaho Chinese would have belonged to *one* family! When a white man would ask a Chinese miner what Mr. Saw's name was, he would say Ah Saw, meaning "that one is Saw." The word "Ah" meant "that one" and was not part of the name at all. The whites, not knowing Chinese, had no way to tell that "Ah" was not part of the names, so a great many Chinese wound up with what look like first names when no first names were given.

Because they would work on claims that paid two dollars a day when whites would not touch claims that paid much less than five, Chinese miners could find a lot of gold in Idaho in the 1870s. They had to work much harder than the whites did, though. White miners passed by claims that were full of rock and boulders because they were too much work. Chinese miners would go to the trouble of picking up and washing off each boulder. Neat piles of rock and boulders still can be seen where Chinese miners worked many years ago. Along the Salmon River Canyon between Riggins and Whitebird, Chinese miners dug small tunnels to get at buried placer gold. If you travel down Highway 95 through the canyon, you can see these if you watch closely.

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Chinese culture shaped Idaho's heritage

In Idaho, the Chinese usually lived in groups, somewhat like the large families they were used to in China. They kept their Chinese customs, such as having parades on their Chinese New Year's Day. Although they were different from the white miners, we still can learn something from the Chinese who came here long ago. They worked hard to keep up their families, and in doing that, they did a lot to build Idaho into the state that it is today. The Chinese who came to Idaho as miners in the 1800s are gone now, but they ought not to be forgotten.

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Idaho City man who grew and
peddled his own vegetables.
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