

# Chinese Immigrants and the Transcontinental Railroad

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With the California Gold Rush and the opening of the West came an increased interest in building a transcontinental railroad. To this end, the Central Pacific Railroad Company was established, and construction of the route East from Sacramento began in 1863. This was in the midst of the Civil War, and constituted the most ambitious project that the country had ever contemplated. The cost was immense: \$136 million, more than twice the federal budget in 1861. The challenge was also enormous; 1,800 miles across arid plains, desert and the Rocky Mountains. Two companies undertook the actual construction in return for land grants and financial subsidies: The Union Pacific and The Central Pacific. Both quickly faced labor shortage and started to employ Chinese immigrants,



“arguing that the people who build the Great Wall of China and invented gunpowder could certainly build a railroad”. The choice of Chinese immigrants can also be explained by the fact Irish were complaining about their wages. Chinese peasants from the Canton Province began arriving on California's shores in 1850, pushed by poverty and overpopulation from their homeland and in 1852 there were as much as 25,000 Chinese immigrants there. The majority were married men who planned to return to China.

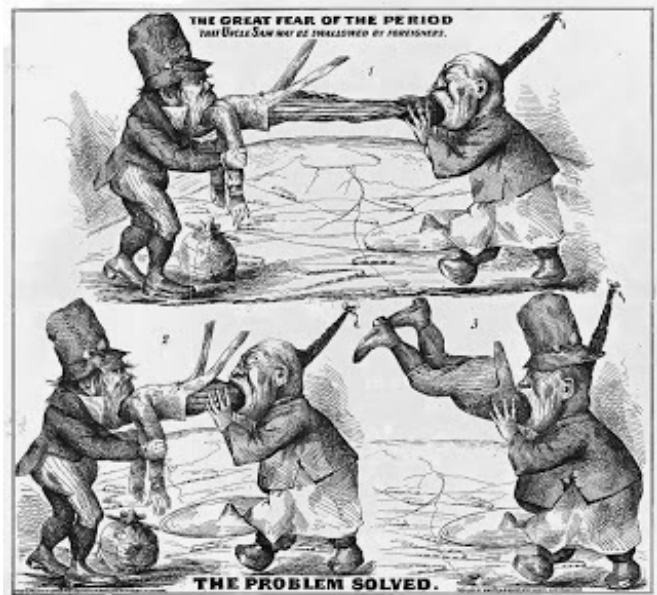
Chinese immigrant workers received just \$26-\$35 a month for a 12-hour day, 6-day work week and had to provide their own food and tents whereas white workers received about \$35 a month and were furnished with food and shelter. Chinese workers quickly earned a reputation as tireless and extraordinarily reliable workers--“quiet, peaceable, patient, industrious, and economical.” Within two years 90 % of railroad employees were Chinese immigrants. The work was hard, performed almost entirely by hand. Accidents, avalanches, and explosions left as estimated 1,200 Chinese immigrant workers dead. Working day and night, Chinese construction crews tunneled through solid granite. They organized themselves into eight-hour shifts. Even when winter snowstorms hit and many of the other workers refused to work, many of the Chinese laborers went on working. By creating air shafts and access tunnels, they worked and lived completely under the snow. Oswald Garrison Villard Testifies before United States Congress: “I want to remind you of the things that Chinese labor did for us in opening up the western portion of this country [...] He never forgot and never failed to praise the Chinese, of whom nearly 10,000 stormed the forest fastness, endured cold and heat . . . to aid in the opening up of our great Northwestern empire”



But this was far from the majority of American's reaction and despite their heroic labors; California's Chinese immigrants became the objects of discriminatory laws and racial violence. There had always been a great deal of prejudice towards the Chinese-Americans but after the completion of the Transcontinental railroad it only became worse. Despite the provisions for equal treatment of Chinese immigrants in the 1868 Burlingame Treaty, political and labor organizations rallied against the immigration of what they regarded as a degraded race and "cheap Chinese labor." Newspapers condemned the policies of employers, and even church leaders denounced the entrance of these aliens into what was regarded as a land for whites only. Further, California enacted numerous discriminatory laws including special taxes and segregation.



In reaction the immigrants established support networks, based on family ties and place of origin, and found work in agriculture, mines, domestic service, and increasingly in railroad construction. Praise for the Chinese-Americans is long overdue. The government over the last couple of decades is beginning to recognize the significant achievements of this important segment of America. The Chinese-Americans helped to fulfill the dream of a nation and were integral in the improvement of America. Their techniques and perseverance deserve to be recognized as an accomplishment that changed a nation.



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