Piecing Together the Past: Chinese Immigrants in Yosemite

by Stephanie Guerra

There's no question that Yosemite's majestic mountain peaks and monumental scenery attract and captivate visitors. But behind each mountain, upon each road, and within each of the vast meadows and forests, are human stories waiting to be told. Finding these stories, though, can sometimes be challenging—that's where ethnohistory comes in. In recent years, National Park Archivist James Snyder and a number of interpretive rangers, such as Shelton Johnson and Yenyen Chan, have explored the cultural history of Yosemite National Park. While their work represents steps toward incorporating the diverse histories in Yosemite's historical and cultural narrative, cultural resource managers have opportunities to contribute additional ethnohistorical insights, enrich our knowledge of the park's cultural history, and reflect the diversity of park patrons, surrounding communities, and the nation.

Ethnohistory research draws on methods and concepts from the fields of history and cultural anthropology to develop a more holistic and inclusive account of the history of human experience and cultural change. A primary goal of ethnohistory is to go beyond the information contained in documents written by and for a single group to understand the cultural and social contexts within which historical events have occurred, popular opinions shaped, and cultural traditions transformed. To accomplish this goal,



Miners pose for a photo during the California Gold Rush at Auburn Ravine in 1852. NPS, Photographer unknown.

practitioners compare and integrate information from a variety of sources, including official and unofficial documents, oral tradition, photographs, maps, ethnographic materials and writings, archeological findings, folklore, paintings, ecological data, oral histories, and contemporary traditions and practices.

One area of ethnohistorical interest in Yosemite is the experiences of Chinese immigrants, which was recently explored by the park's interpretive rangers and cultural anthropology staff. Through examining a variety of existing sources and records, the story of their Yosemite experience is emerging.

In 1870, Olive Logan wrote "Does it Pay to Visit Yo Semite?" for Galaxy Magazine. As she travelled to Yosemite, Olive encountered miners, immigrants, and herders. In her stagecoach, Olive saw "Chinese and Chinese and yet again . . . Chinese gambling, and Chinese mining and irrigating and planting and . . . on horseback." While Logan's story was recorded in Galaxy Magazine, the experiences of Chinese immigrants are less apparent. By examining Chinese Camp, California, and the contributions of Chinese immigrants within Yosemite, we are able to recognize the cultural connections that link Chinese immigrants in and around the Yosemite region to Yosemite's diverse past.

Chinese populations were present in California before the creation of Yosemite National Park in 1890. As environmental and social strife catalyzed Chinese immigration, many Chinese found refuge in California. Founded in 1849, Chinese Camp stands as a marker to the contributions made by Chinese populations in the Sierra Nevada region. Located west of what is now Yosemite National Park, Chinese Camp connected San Francisco to mining and grazing communities before the arrival of tourists in 1855 and more than a decade before the arrival of John Muir.

Chinese workers throughout California in and around the Sierra Nevada region of Yosemite faced many challenges. Ostracized for their language and cultural traditions, Chinese miners were also forced to pay a foreign miner's tax. Despite overt discrimination they faced on a regular basis, the Chinese community overcame obstacles and remained in the area, worked mines, and established their own communities and businesses.

The 1860 California Census provides a portrait into the past. From merchants, to housekeepers, cooks and doctors, Chinese workers shaped their community and environment. Although preliminary research has not uncovered primary accounts of Chinese workers' experiences from their own perspectives, artifacts and environmental features allow us to piece together pieces of the past. Archeological artifacts such as pottery shards and utensils allow researchers to assess what immigrants did on a daily basis.

By 1880 the population of Chinese immigrants that came to California decreased, perhaps due to hostilities surrounding "coolie labor" which was manifested in the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Nonetheless, the influence of Chinese workers and communities can be found in traveler's accounts and archeological evidence. An examination of road construction and labor in Yosemite National Park further illuminates the presence and contributions of Chinese groups.

In 1874 the Coulterville and Yosemite Turnpike Company began construction of the Coulterville and Big Oak Flat Road to Yosemite Valley. Fifty Chinese workers were hired in December of 1874 and their numbers quickly grew to 300. They labored arduously through snow and unforgiving winter cold and completed the bulk of construction by April, when the first wave of tourists began entrance from Wawona. Tourists enjoyed walking over unfinished portions of road as Chinese laborers disassembled, carried, and reassembled their wagons. Chinese immigrants began work on the Great Sierra Wagon Road in 1882. Chinese and Euro Americans worked together as they used blasting powder, graders, and shovels from Tioga Pass to the Sheepherder Mine. Their work extended beyond 56 miles and ended in 1883. In 1919, Charles J. Belden's article "The Tioga Road" across the Sierra Nevada" recognized the importance of the road as "a means of establishing a new route across the mountains and opening up the northern part of the Yosemite region." While Chinese immigrants actively reshaped the Yosemite region through arduous labor, they also contributed to Yosemite's growing hospitality industry.

The Wawona Washburn Hartwig Collection, found in Yosemite National Park's archives, provides clues into the role of Chinese workers at the Wawona hotel and within Yosemite National Park. Wawona Hartwig was born into the Washburn family in 1914. Beginning in 1860, her family established roads and a hotel in the Yosemite region. The Wawona Hotel, which she was named after,



Chinese Worker in Yosemite National Park. Circa 1850s.

was managed by her family until 1930 and is frequented by visitors today. Wawona Hartwig's research notes on Yosemite reflect upon her childhood growing up in the Wawona Hotel. Her writings about Chinese employees at the Wawona Hotel reveal that Chinese chefs such as Ah You were much more than culinary talents. Wawona's documents reflect upon the culture and community of Chinese workers who maintained familial and cultural connections beyond Yosemite and beyond the United States.

Ah You's culinary feats are well known in Yosemite's history. His tenure as a chef at the Wawona Hotel lasted forty seven years and, in that time, he cooked for President Harrison and Theodore Roosevelt. While Ah You was known for his delectable dishes, especially his pastries, his personal journey connected with mining and lumber industries and spanned from San Francisco to Yosemite National Park. According to a 1938 Merced Sun Star interview, Ah You was born in China in 1848 and arrived in the United States in 1869, where he worked as a cook in San Francisco. Ah You later travelled through the San Joaquin Valley where he also worked as a cook in many hotels and camps. It was his work at Leidig's Hotel in Yosemite Valley that provided an opportunity for the Washburns to convince him to work at their hotel and Ah You began his seasonal work as a chef for the Wawona Hotel in 1879. Wawona Hartwig's writing on her childhood reflected on Chinese workers and praised Ah You for his work and kind

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demeanor. Wawona wrote, "Hardly anyone who knew the old Wawone would not have heard of Ah You, the treasure of our Chinese employees. Cooks, laundrymen and gardeners, they were all loyal and efficient, but Ah You was special."

The sale of the Wawona Hotel to the Yosemite Park and Curry Company in 1932 marked the end of employment for Chinese workers. Chinese employees, including Ah You, were replaced by female employees. Six years later, the Merced Sun Star interviewed Ah You. At the time of the interview, Ah You, at ninety years old, lived in San Francisco and still had all of the culinary talent he was known for. Yet, there is little documentation of his life after working in Yosemite. While Ah You's experience provides tantalizing clues about the park's history of diversity, locating primary accounts, written by Chinese immigrants would provide valuable insight into this topic. Yet, with continued research and community outreach we can continue to piece together the diverse mosaic of Yosemite National Park.

By exploring ethnohistory, Yosemite will offer additional perspectives on the park experience, acknowledge diverse histories, and connect with communities beyond Yosemite's boundaries. This will engage and develop a new facet of stewardship that not only recognizes the beauty of the park but also acknowledges and values the rich human histories hidden in and on the landscape. •

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