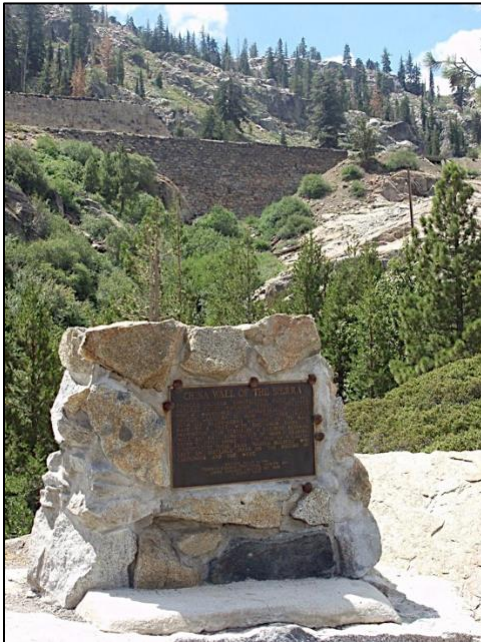


The Chinese Transcontinental Railroad

By Corri Jimenez

The construction of the First Continental Railroad was not only a feat but also a competition between two railroads, the western Central Pacific Railroad (CPRR) and eastern Union Pacific Railroad (UPRR). Thousands of Chinese laborers worked on the railroad and *were* the biggest workforce for the CPRR. The UPRR, knowing the tunneling feat through the Sierra Nevada Mountains, mocked the CPRR early in the process that they would be there before “they could dig out of the Sierras.”

Assisting with this task under the direction of Tycoon Charles Crocker of the “Big Four,” the contracting firm of Sisson, Wallace and Company employed 10-15,000 Chinese from Canton’s Guangzhou province as inexpensive labor as early as 1865. Crocker, along with his CPRR founders Leland Stanford, Mark Hopkins, and Collis P. Huntington, provided financial capital to build the railroad in meeting the Congressional deadline.



The Chinese contribution to the CPRR was immeasurable. For one, they were responsible for blasting and digging out 15 tunnels through solid granite. Sierra granite is dense rock and was glacier-covered with over 20 feet of snow. Progress blasting through granite was made in inches per an 8-hour day. The tunnels were hit from the outside-in/inside-out, and Tunnel 6, the longest of all the tunnels, alone took two years to construct. The Chinese workforce included unskilled labor as well as skilled workers, such as cooks, physicians, and masons. The “China Wall,” a dry-laid coursed rubble constructed wall, was built by Chinese masons to support the railroad bed. Besides risking their lives for minimum wage, the Chinese workers endured blasting accidents, winter avalanches, and intense racism. Derogatory slurs and cartoons of Chinese workers speak volumes, such as “Crocker’s pets,” or in Truckee, “Crocker’s pest.”

Caption: “China Wall of the Sierra” and historic plaque (Photo by Corri Jimenez, 2010).

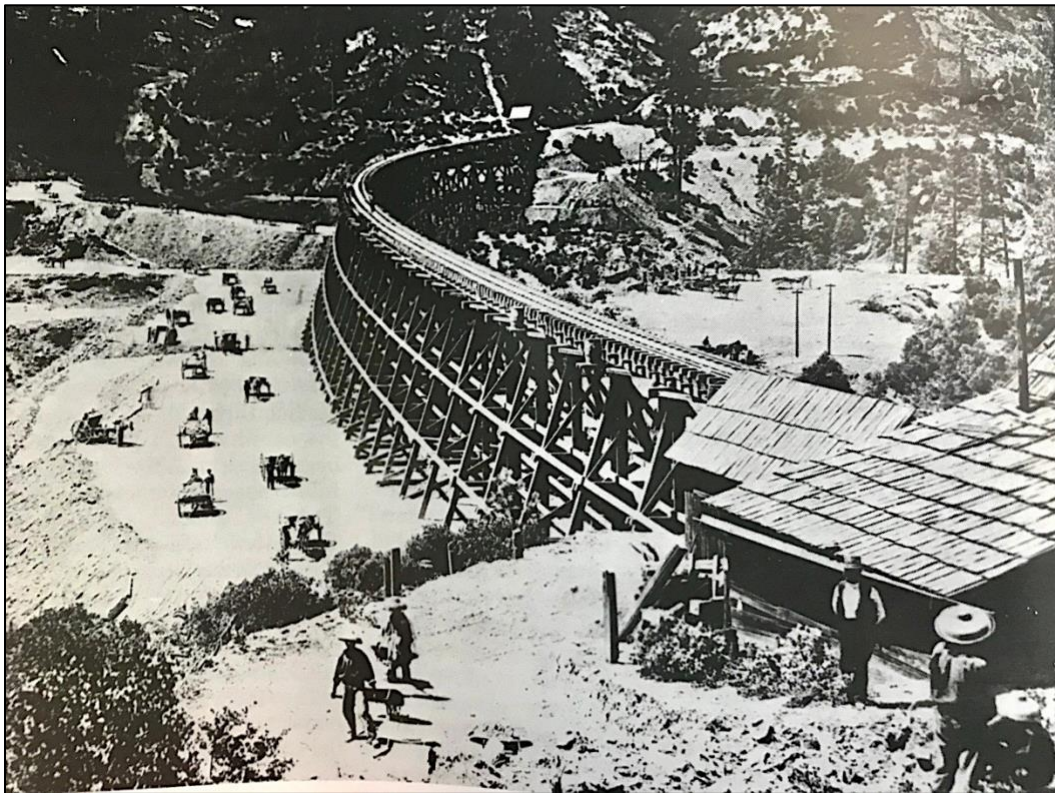
In perspective, the Chinese immigrants must have experienced a cultural and climatic shock coming to America, not to mention dietary, religious, and language challenges. They acclimated well to their new surroundings by bonding to their brethren. They were known to regularly bathe in the Truckee River and drank boiled water for tea; therefore, suffered little disease compared to other cultural groups that worked on the railroad.

The 1866-67 winter was harsh and powerful to all who worked on the railroad. A *Sacramento Union Record* reporter commented, the Chinese “literally worked and lived under snow.” Living in their own camps near Cisco Grove, each railroad gang was responsible for paying their lead and camp cook. Food, along with tools, were not included in their pay. In 1867, Chinese for example were paid \$35/month (excluded room/board), the equivalent today of approximately \$594.00, which was two-thirds less than their Irish-born coworkers. Any extra money saved went home to families via a courier or merchants in San Francisco that served as bankers. The money truly

improved their native villages by building new schools, halls, as well as providing protection from gang violence back home.

On June 25, 1867, Chinese workers decided to go on strike, demanding higher wages and a more moderate workday (10-hour days for general work and 8 hour days in the tunnels). Superintendent James Strobridge of the Sisson, Wallace & Co. tried to intimidate the workers back to work and Crocker believed the strike was instigated by opium dealers. With food trains and supplies cutoff, the Chinese were hungry and received verbal threats from Crocker that included fines or not being paid. The Chinese returned peacefully to work without their demands met and it is unknown what really transpired in the short week strike.

With the strike lifted, the CPRR worked on sections over the Sierra Nevada Mountains as tunneling continued. In May 1868, the CPRR worked on creating a railroad between Truckee and Reno, completed on June 15, 1868, which further connected the lumber industry in Truckee to the silver mines in Virginia City's Comstock Mining District in the 1870s. The CPRR eventually met the UPRR at Promontory Point, Utah, on May 10, 1869, with Truckee becoming one of the main hubs on its line between Sacramento and Ogden.



Caption: Chinese working on the railroad. Located in *Fire & Ice* (Truckee: Truckee Donner Historical Society, 1994:20).

The Chinese workers' contribution to the CPRR is best summarized by Leland Stanford who said, "Without the Chinese, it would have been impossible to complete the Western portion of this great national highway." This praise, however, has never really been doted on the Chinese because it was quickly eclipsed by the anti-Chinese movement that grasped California in the 1880s into the 20th century with exclusion acts. Since this praise was overshadowed by negativity, let us pause on this 150th anniversary of the railroad and reflect on the Chinese and how they contributed to our

American history for without the railroad, our coasts would not have been connected, freight would not get to its destinations, and so much more.

Sidebars:

- To learn more on this topic, join us on June 22, 2019 for a historical talk on the Chinese and their relevance to the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad, 7:00-8:00 pm, Truckee Airport Conference Room, 10356 Truckee Airport Road, Truckee.
- For more information and a list of summer activities going on in Truckee to celebrate the sesquicentennial of the Transcontinental Railroad go to <https://goldspike.org> or the Facebook page: Donner Summit-Truckee Golden Spike Celebration.

About the author:

Corri Jimenez is an architectural historian and historic preservation professional working in the Tahoe area. For additional information, check out *Fire & Ice: A Portrait of Truckee* by Truckee Donner Historical Society (Truckee: Truckee Donner Historical Society, 1994) or Donner Summit Historical Society *Heirloom* newsletters (October 2010, June 2016, October 2016, June 2017, November 2017) at www.donnertsummithistoricalsociety.org/pages/Newsletters.