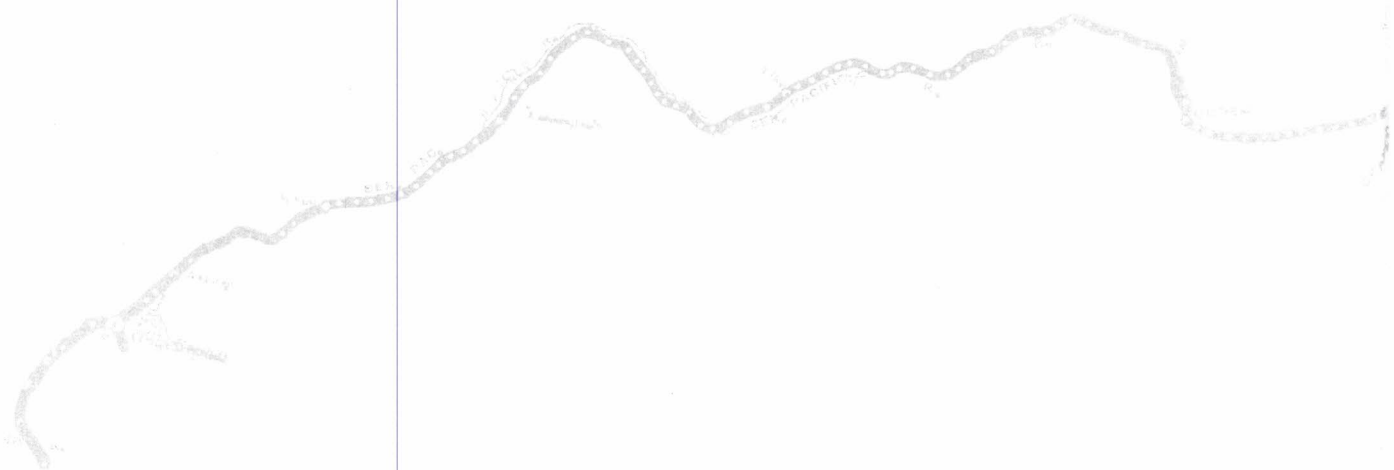




***Voices from the Railroad:
Stories by descendants of Chinese railroad workers***

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(front cover) Chinese worker with tools walking along railroad tracks. Daniel K.E. Ching Collection, CHSA-2072, CHSA.

(front & back cover, title pages) Rand McNally And Company, and Union Pacific Railway Company. *New map of the Union Pacific Railway, the short, quick and safe line to all points west* (detail). [Chicago, 1883] Map. <https://www.loc.gov/item/98688838/>.

(inside front cover) "Great Event" Union Pacific Railroad poster advertising the opening of the U.S. transcontinental railroad, 1869. Courtesy Connie Young Yu.

Lee Wong Sang, Laying Tracks to Follow

Connie Young Yu

When I entered the village of Sun Chuen, I saw a familiar-looking figure walking by, and I snapped his picture. Wearing a broad, sturdy bamboo hat, my village cousin looked as though he just emerged from a Central Pacific work camp, 1869. This was the year 1983, Toisan, southern China, and there he was, my Lee kinsman, wearing the same type of headgear my great-grandfather wore when he was in working on the trans-continental railroad in the Sierras.

This was the "hard hat" worn by Chinese railroad workers in the 19th century, protecting them from the heat of the sun and falling rocks in the summer, the winter snow and icicles in the tunnel they were drilling and blasting through, inches per day.

The bamboo hats must have served them well. And I thought, it still does the job five generations later, shielding my village cousin from the elements.

I've been to the village four times and found the weather hot and humid, and even when it rains, it is warm. I wonder how my great-grandfather endured the winter at Donner Summit, much less, his first summer in San Francisco.

When I was in grammar school studying California history, there was never any mention of Chinese workers developing the state. It was the '50s, and Chinese were still seen as aliens, a mere decade after the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion law. But years later in high school reading American history textbooks, I still couldn't find anything about Chinese or any minorities for that matter. We didn't exist in America.

My mother changed my sensibility when said this one sentence in Chinese: "My grandfather, your great-grandfather, came to Gum San to work on the Iron Road (鐵路)."

So began my trust in oral history. It has been the key source for the story of my railroad ancestor, the first of my family to come to America.

In 1866 Lee Wong Sang (李旺生) arrived in San Francisco, a nineteen-year-old from Sun Chuen Village (莘村) in the Sunning district of Guangdong, now known as Toisan, and went directly to work for the Central Pacific. He and several of his cousins took the long, arduous ocean journey, knowing there was employment waiting for them

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in California. In 1865 there was a clarion call from America for Chinese labor, to build an iron road, the longest yet. They were young and strong, lured by the promise of "good wages in Gum San," daily meals and enough money to send home. The future looked bleak in the village for the youthful men, and by leaving, it meant hope for the whole clan. They were not the first. There were Lees working in Gum San for many years, in occupations from mining to cigar making. The newcomers were met at the wharf by kinsmen, who took them by wagon to a clan lodging house in Chinatown. There they stayed briefly before heading to a work camp east of Sacramento.

Lee Wong Sang quickly rose from the ranks of workers, because of his industry and initiative, and most importantly, his quickness in learning English. He became a "head man" of his camp, supervising the work and acting as an intermediary between Chinese contractors and the Central Pacific.

Did he tell his wife and children about his work on the Central Pacific, what his kinsmen did in the Sierras, building 15 tunnels through solid granite and the feat of laying 10 miles of track in one day? None of that. The only story he told of his experience on the Iron Road was about losing his precious \$20 gold piece, acquired from his dollar a day wages. He carried the gold coin in a pouch tied around his waist and while going to the latrine one night, he lost it. He cried over this, for a month.

After the completion of the Transcontinental, he returned to San Francisco, and joined his kinsmen as a partner in an import-export store in Chinatown. It was a golden opportunity to become a merchant, and being smart, responsible and of admirable character, he succeeded.

THE VILLAGE BRIDE

In the early 1870s it was not difficult for a Chinese man such as Lee Wong Sang, to send for his wife, whom he married in China. There was no exclusion law in effect, and San Francisco, "Dai Fow," the big city, had a bustling Chinese community.

Chin Shee lived in the village with her in-laws, as was the custom. But what she did was contrary to Chinese custom—to be a woman leaving her village to join her husband in a foreign land. In fact, his mother arranged the marriage before he left for America to ensure that he would return to China—with riches. Then he and his wife would raise a family in the village, the same pattern of life as a hundred generations before them. But Lee Wong Sang, would go against the wishes of his parents and tradition. After working on the railroad, he saw business opportunities in San Francisco's Chinatown and for having a family in Gum San. As a foreman on the railroad he worked hard, purposefully, and saved his money (sans the gold piece lost in the latrine), enough to pay for his wife's passage on the ship, in a cabin, not steerage.

So Chin Shee got the message, carefully packing her wedding skirt and her few other belongings. She sailed from the port of Hong Kong with two other women going to joining their



Connie Young Yu Collection

Chin Shee, widow of Lee Wong Sang, c. 1920s, wearing an imperial robe with the insignia of a crane, the highest civil rank, granted to her husband. The skirt hid her feet, which were unbound.

husbands. A very rare circumstance, for three respectable woman to leave their homeland to come to the wild west of Gum San. It was an all-male society, and Chinese girls were commonly sold or kidnapped into slavery and prostituted. Chin Shee knew that only fate kept her from being one of those girls. She was coming to America just a couple years before the passage of America's first restrictive immigration law, the Page Act of 1875. This federal legislation was aimed at stopping "coolie slaves" and "immoral Chinese women" from entering the country. The Page Act effectively curtailed the immigration of Chinese women and paved the way for the Chinese Exclusion Law of 1882.

She had ventured only as far as her village marketplace, and now she was going to live in a foreign country thousands of miles away. She was one of three Chinese ladies on a ship with hundreds of male passengers. In the same quarters they bonded together, and shared their fears, more than hopes. The women knew where they were going wasn't a gold mountain. They had heard that the white men of California were savage people with red hair. Some were actually cannibals. Tales of the Donner Party must have reached Hong Kong.

The ladies were truly the "tempest tossed," as they endured the stormy seas for week after week. One of the women was seasick throughout, tossing and turning in her bunk, and lost most of her hair. She was so mortified she would disembark a bald young bride. Would her husband recognize her? Actually, two of the ladies went with the wrong husbands, and had to make a switch after they arrived in Chinatown. My great-grandmother was with the right man, and for the first time she felt safe. She and Wong Sang lived above the store on Dupont Street, where she gave birth to three sons and a daughter who died in infancy. Her life as a respectable woman meant she hardly left her home. She cared for her children and supported the store by making special cakes to sell for holidays, such as the lunar new year and moon festival. Her husband was doing well in the import and export business, trading with China. He became the manager and top shareholder of the firm, Quong Shing Lung. Among the products exported was dried shrimp. Lee Wong Sang's company had its own fishing boat in the Bay, with its name in Chinese written on the side.

In 1904 his bright and capable second son, Lee Yoke Suey, (李玉瑞) went to China to marry and brought his lovely, delicate teenage bride, Jeong Hing Tong, back to San Francisco. Yoke Suey's mother was already in China, and his father Lee Wong Sang was planning to retire and join her in Sun Chuen. The plan was for Lee Yoke Suey to manage the business his father built, and expand it further.

REFUGEES FROM THE EARTHQUAKE AND FIRE OF 1906

My grandmother, Jeong Hing Tong, had given birth to her first child, my Aunt Alice, a month earlier, and the Lees were going to have a red eggs and ginger party on April 18. They had hard boiled eggs ready for dyeing. Then disaster struck at 5:12 a.m. while everyone was still asleep, and their two-story wooden building was rocking like a boat. After the tremors ceased, they evacuated. Even in amid such disaster, my grandmother adhered to custom, snipping a few strands of the baby's hair (baby's first haircut) and rolling an egg over her head (blessing and luck). Lee Wong Sang was very concerned for his daughter-in-law, a nursing mother, urging her to drink a cup of water. My grandmother never forgot his kindness during that traumatic morning. Leaving Chinatown, her husband Lee Yoke Suey turned around and headed to the store where he had valuable papers, his birth certificate and business records. *Go*, he told his wife and his father, *I will join you later*.

The refugees were heading to the Presidio where there were emergency stations. The streets were crowded with people carrying bundles of belongings, using anything on wheels. How my fragile Poh-Poh made it, walking on bound feet and carrying an infant, I can only imagine. But she was 18 years old, and her father-in-law, the

former railroad worker, was in charge. Most likely, he had a wagon or cart and pulled her and the baby along.

What about her husband? Lee Yoke Suey was moving in the opposite direction, to the company store, against the fleeing crowd. He got some papers from a safe, and stuffed them in his padded jacket. A soldier assuming he was a looter bayoneted him. Lee was struck in his side, and he fell and played dead. When the soldier moved on, Lee got up, pressed his hand to his wounded side and hobbled to safety. It was fortunate he was wearing a padded Chinese jacket, and the wound was not deep. He had rescued his papers, most importantly, the birth certificate which was proof of his citizenship.

The earthquake and fire of 1906 devastated the entire Chinatown. My grandparents fled to Oakland to stay with relatives and then to a shrimp camp in Marin. City officials wanted the Chinatown property and proposed to move the Chinese elsewhere, far from the center of San Francisco, but the Chinese resisted the takeover. Within two years, the Lees recovered their business and resumed their lives in San Francisco. Lee Wong Sang sailed back to China. His son, my grandfather, Lee Yoke Suey took over the responsibilities of the Chinatown firm.

Lee Wong Sang returned to the village a respected elder. He had sent money to rebuild their ancestral home in the village, and he and his wife would live comfortably there. The district officials granted him the honor of wearing a robe with the insignia of the crane, the highest civil rank. His wife could wear such a robe with a crane, too. Lee died within a couple years of returning home, but his wife lived until she was eighty years old, a proud matriarch with many grandchildren.

My mother spent her childhood in China with her mother and siblings when her father was going back and forth from San Francisco to Hong Kong and Shanghai for business. His children could only attend the Oriental School in Chinatown, and Lee saw more restrictions and rulings being enacted against Asians. He took his whole family with him to China. Mary lived with her elderly grandmother, Mrs. Lee Wong Sang, for several years and heard her story of her voyage to America as a young bride. These, and stories of her mother, widow of Lee Yoke Suey, were passed down to me. Some facts of their lives were filled in when I found my Grandma Lee's immigration records in the National Archives in San Bruno, a thick and heavy file. It was the paper trail of Mrs. Lee Yoke Suey, named Wong Shee, detained on Angel Island for 15 and a half months.

ENDURING THE EXCLUSION ERA

Lee Yoke Suey, his son, was a member of the Oriental Trading Company in China and an agent for Haas Bros. and Levi Strauss. The birth certificate he risked his life to save did him little service, as Lee was always stopped and questioned even though he carried an American passport and letters of introduction from the San Francisco companies he represented.

Tragedy struck the Lee family in September, 1922. On a return trip to China, Lee Yoke Suey died of cancer on board ship. After a year of mourning, according to tradition, his widow, my grandmother wanted to return with her children to America. She had the proper re-entry papers. She was the wife of a merchant and U.S. citizen and her children were American born. My mother told me the thrill she felt entering the Golden Gateway, and how she and her sisters jumped with joy seeing the city of their birth. And then, disappointment and despair followed.

Arriving in San Francisco January 1924 with her six children, Mrs. Lee Yoke Suey was caught by the immigration law designed to restrict Asian Immigration. Authorities declared that since her husband was deceased, Mrs. Lee no longer had any status even though she had re-entry papers and being born in China, she was an "alien ineligible for citizenship." She was separated from her children—four teenage daughters, and two little sons—and

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Connie Young Yu Collection

Photo of sons of Lee Wong Sang and their families, San Francisco, 1909. Lee Yoke Suey is in the middle. His wife, Jeung Hing, is fourth from left, holding the baby (Mary Lee, b. 1908, my mother).

sent to Angel Island Immigration Station's detention barracks. Upon medical examination she was found to have clonorchiasis, a non-contagious condition caused by liver fluke. She was ordered to be deported immediately. The Lee daughters rushed to the office of Haas Bros. ask for help from their father's business associate. Walter Haas' attorney, Charles Fickert was able to stop Mrs. Lee's deportation, but another hearing and a prolonged court case ensued. Finally, after a detention of fifteen and a half months on Angel Island, she was released by the decision of the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit Court.¹

Passage of the Chinese Exclusion Law of 1882 was a pivotal moment in American history, excluding a class and race of people from immigration, and the Chinese from naturalization to U.S. citizenship. It created a process of documentation which is a critical source of knowing about our roots and immigration history. I have followed this paper trail, as have many descendants of immigrants, seen my great-grandfather Lee Wong Sang's signature and his testimony in countless cases involving his sons traveling to and from China and daughter-in-law, when she first arrived in 1904. Some records were from the era when Chinese immigrants were processed at the Customs House on the wharf, before Angel Island Immigration Station was established. Guilty until proven innocent. Never in the interrogations did Lee Wong Sang mention being a worker on the railroad. Only identifying himself as a long time merchant of San Francisco. He would not imperil the fate of his family members by declaring that he was once a laborer, the despised class of Chinese barred from entry to America.

I'm here, 4th-generation Chinese in America because my great-grandfather chose to stay in America after his labors on the railroad, to raise a family and build a community. But America was never welcoming to him, nor was his American-born son ever accepted as a citizen. Immigration records are a testament to the struggle and hardship they endured to prove they had a right to live in America, but always that Chinese was their nationality. I learned the minute details about the Lee family village. The questions and answers were given in English and translated by a Chinese interpreter. Some things you have to figure out. For instance, the name for the village Sun Cheun was often spelled "Sun Toon" in the printed immigration testimonies, as that is how would sound in Toisan dialect. The village is a large one, occupied by the Lee clan, and a great many Lees of Gum San are from there.

I learned that Sandy Lee, whose article is in this same volume, has roots on her paternal side from Sun Chuen, and her railroad ancestor and mine were first cousins. Her great-grandfather Lee was born in the same store, 706 Dupont St., as my grandfather Lee Yoke Suey, and delivered by the same midwife. It's a small world when it comes to railroad worker descendants.

For over a hundred and fifty years my mother's family kept its connection to the village, through wars, revolution, famine. Sun Chuen is known in the province as one of the "overseas villages," where so many people left for America and sent money from Gum San. Long ago, my mother told me, it was known as a "railroad village."

When I visited Sun Chuen in 2014 my village cousins were no longer wearing the straw hats, nor were they skinny. They wore colorful western clothes and there were cottage industries in the village, and the people were prosperous. The village was proud of its large middle school with a big sports field. Our large ancestral house is well-maintained and has modern amenities. On the wall with a big flat screen television are still the old photos of my grandfather, Lee Yoke Suey and his children, and my village cousin who lives in the house now, pays respects to her departed American kinfolk every Ching Ming.

THE CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION: GREAT EXPECTATIONS

My parents, John and Mary Young, of San Francisco, joined the Chinese Historical Society of America, when it was established in 1963. All their lives they had saved memorabilia from their respective pioneer families, and kept the stories to themselves. Now they could do something meaningful—and exciting—with it all. The founders of CHSA were their friends, Thomas Chinn, C. H. Kwock, Chingwah Lee, H.K. Wong and Thomas Wu. The Youngs participated in CHSA's field trips of Chinese sites in the West, the recovering of Chinese artifacts and fundraising for a museum. Philip P. Choy was president of CHSA during this heady time leading up to the Centennial and Col. John C. Young was vice-president.²

Founder Thomas Chinn and Phil asked the Chinese Six Companies to organize the fundraising for two commemorative plaques, one for the starting point of the railroad in Sacramento, and one to be placed at the terminus at Promontory. The Chinese community enthusiastically responded. The grand finale would be the presentation of the plaque at Promontory, May 10, 1969, with the nation watching. In the words of Phil Choy, it was "the great opportunity to put the Chinese on the map."

At the time I was a 27-year-old housewife in Santa Clara with three children under five. I couldn't attend the planning meetings or go to Utah for all the hoopla, but I wanted to be part of this historical milestone. I had my calling: I'd write an article for the Chinese community. The railroad was our claim to America, our bedrock. It was the greatest enterprise of the 19th century, and the Chinese built the western portion of it. The railroad brought my great-grandfather here, it saved his village, it made us Americans. The first transcontinental railroad was the greatest engineering feat of the 19th century—and without Chinese workers, it would not have



Connie Young Yu Collection

CHSA President Philip P. Choy with Chinese Consul General Tung-hua Chou dedicates CHSA's plaque in Sacramento, California May 8, 1969.

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happened. We'd tell it to the world.

In the evenings when my physician husband was home to babysit, I went to work. I read every book on the railroad I could get my hands on. Buying a visitor's pass, I delved into the archives in the Green Library at Stanford, pouring through 19th century newspapers—the originals in bound albums were accessible then—feeling a grand historical period come alive.

My parents had tickets for the "Golden Spike Special", the commemorative train ride on the actual route of the Central Pacific from Sacramento to Ogden, Utah.

One of the stops was Truckee where Centennial festivities were to take place. Phil Choy received an invitation from the president of the Truckee-Donner Chamber of Commerce to participate. But he wasn't going on the Golden Spike Special train, as he was to present the plaque to Chinese workers in Sacramento May 8. He designated my dad to be CHSA's representative at Truckee, then Phil would fly in with Thomas Chinn for dedication of the second plaque at the terminus of the railroad, Promontory, the May 10th grand Centennial re-enactment ceremony.

Truckee was a critical assembly point of the Central Pacific in the Sierras and after the completion of the transcontinental railroad, many Chinese came back to Truckee seeking more railroad work and to settle there. Members of the newly formed Caucasian League attacked the Chinese workers and burned their homes. But Chinese persevered and rebuilt in Truckee, despite continued attempts to expel them. Finally in 1886, the city council devised a plan of boycotting Chinese businesses, essentially starving out the Chinese, and it worked. The "Truckee Method" would be emulated by other cities who wanted to get rid of Chinese.

In the invitation to Phil Choy, April 17, 1969, the president of the Truckee-Donner Chamber of Commerce, Carson White wrote:

"I have studied some on this subject and have interviewed a few old timers on tape recording and from what I have learned, we owe the Chinese an apology. I will be glad to put it in the form of a plaque if you care to come up for this affair."

Phil wrote back:

"An apology for past animosity is not necessary as neither you nor I are responsible for the past. However, the present and the future is our responsibility, and I am enlightened that you have become aware of the Chinese contribution to the Central Pacific and you are asking us to participate in your celebration."



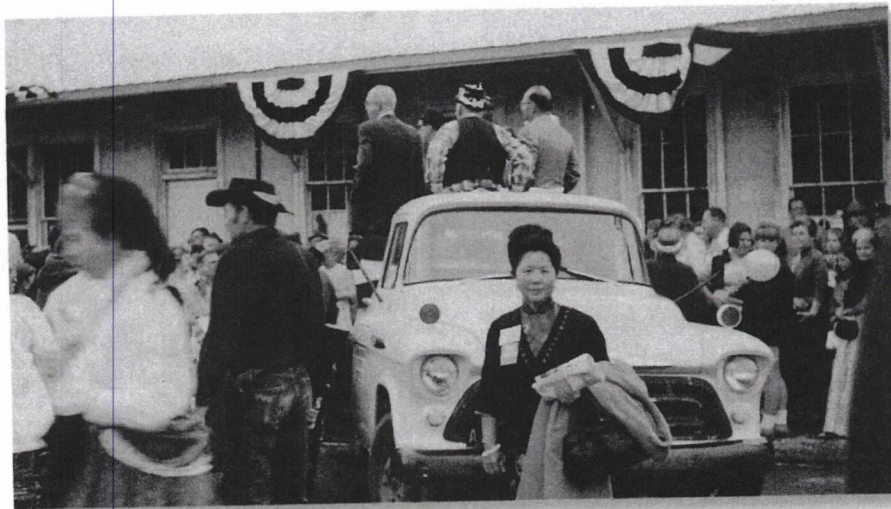
Connie Young Yu Collection

Mary Lee Young, on board the Golden Spike Special, May 9, 1969.

(facing page, top) Mary Lee Young arrives in Ogden, Utah, early morning, May 10, 1969.

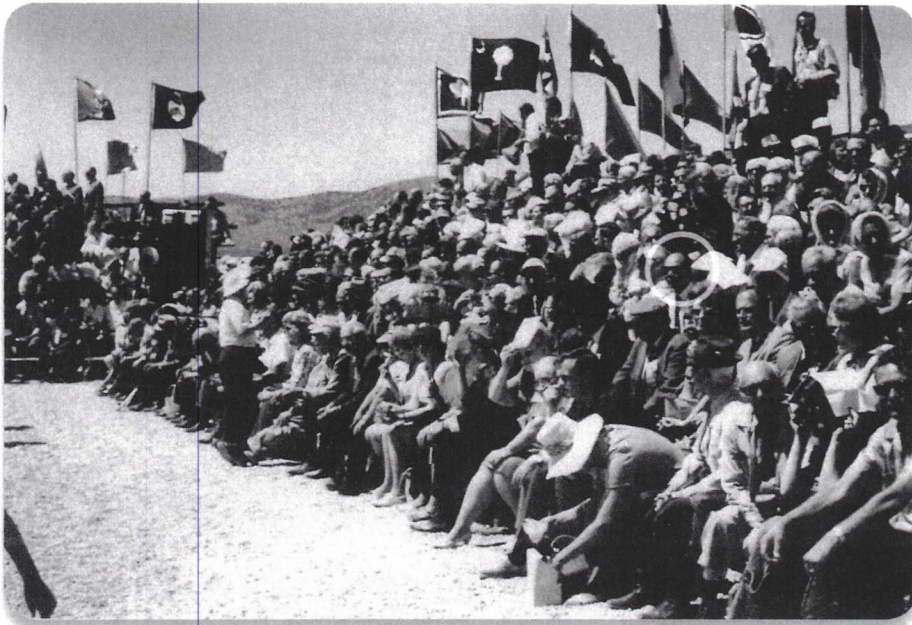
(middle) Mary and John Young and fellow travelers with official Centennial greeter in front of Leland Stanford engine, Ogden, Utah, May 10, 1969.

(bottom) Mary Lee Young at the grand Golden Spike re-enactment event, Promontory, Utah, May 10, 1969. She was only Chinese railroad worker descendant at the Centennial celebration, and no mention was made of it.



Connie Young Yu Collection

VOICES FROM THE RAILROAD



Connie Young Yu Collection

At the Centennial ceremonies, May 10, 1969. John C. Young (circled) was the only Chinese in the crowd.

He designated Col. John Young, who would be aboard the Golden Spike Special train, to represent CHSA at the Truckee ceremony.

At Truckee, my dad expressed the same sentiment as did Phil, no apology is necessary.

Col. Young knew of Truckee's treatment of Chinese but he had no desire for retribution. He and Phil Choy were looking ahead to a day of glory at Promontory. The ugly, racist past would be, well, *past*. The Chinese would have their own moment, and their own historic plaque, and national recognition for their labors at last.

My mother was thrilled to accompany my dad on the scenic train ride on with railroad buffs.³ She was proud of being a descendant, but wasn't going to make a big deal of it. Outside of CHSA there was no acknowledgement of my mother as the granddaughter of a railroad worker. No one in the press corps thought of interviewing her. The era had not yet arrived of celebrating ethnic diversity and "roots."

On the train mother was well aware she was riding on the tracks her grandfather and his fellow workers had laid. It was a triumphant moment for her when she stepped off the train in Ogden, Utah, May 10, 1969.

The main event was at Promontory for the speeches and re-enactment of the Golden Spike ceremony. Three Chinese dignitaries, Phil, Thomas Chinn and Chou Tung-Hua, Consul General of the Republic of China, were seated in the grandstand behind the politicians and Centennial committee officials. My dad was in the bleachers with hundreds of people, the only Chinese in the crowd. He was anticipating the grand moment Phil would step up to the microphone and make his presentation, reading the tribute to the Chinese railroad workers on the plaque.

But it didn't happen.

Phil Choy was told at the last minute there was no time for him on the Centennial program. He was to make his dedication of the plaque in a museum auditorium, before 200 people instead 20,000. Phil was furious and impossible to calm down, although my mother tried. In fact, for the rest of his life, he remained uncalm from the incident at Promontory.

Two days later, the Chinese community in the Bay Area was in an uproar, not because of Phil being snubbed, but because a front page story in the *San Francisco Chronicle* by Dale Champion reported these lines of the keynote speaker John Volpe, Secretary of Transportation, at the Centennial ceremony:

"Who else but Americans could drill ten tunnels in mountains 30 feet deep in snow?

Who else but Americans could chisel through miles of solid granite?

*Who else but Americans could have laid ten miles of track in 12 hours?"*⁴

My mother heard the speech, but nothing was going to take away the pride and the triumph she felt being at Promontory that day. Such souvenirs she brought back for me: a commemorative coin, badges, certificates and several notable books featured at the Centennial. The authors of the railroad books could not deny the major role the Chinese played in building the first transcontinental. My mother met Gerald Best, author of the *"Golden Spike Edition," Iron Horses to Promontory* and asked him to autograph his book for me. He inscribed this message: *I hope you will write a book about the Chinese who did all the hard work.*

I didn't write a book. But the story I was writing for the Centennial was published in the *San Francisco Examiner*, a full page feature appearing May 10, 1969, *The UNSUNG HEROES OF THE GOLDEN SPIKE*, complete with two Central Pacific photos of Chinese on the job.

And I've been working on railroad stories ever since.

In writing my "Unsung Heroes" article, I talked with my father, born in San Jose's Heinlenville Chinatown,⁵ who told me about the benevolent tong members who would go on pilgrimages along railroad routes, "retrieving old friends." These former workers would look for the markers, and dig up the bones of brethren. There would be a bottle buried by the remains with the name of the deceased and his village written on a piece of cloth. In the contracting for Chinese, the Central Pacific agreed that in case of death, their bodies would be sent back to China for burial. I included this anecdote in my "Unsung Heroes" article but it was edited out—the one piece of oral history I wrote in my story. The *Examiner* editor figured the readers didn't want to hear about the bones of the Chinese.

The railroad stories were from oral history on my dad's side. John C. Young listened to the stories of the old men who would come to his father's store. It was the home base for their clan, and some were former railroad workers. I knew about the passage of Chinese exclusion law ever since I could remember, because grandpa always said how lucky he was to have come to the U.S. in 1881, when he was merely eleven, one year before the exclusion law. He was seventeen years old, a brickmaker, when his home base, the Market Street Chinatown was set on fire. Newspapers of the time called it "a fire of mysterious origin," but grandpa said, "it was set to drive us out."

In retrospect, I ponder, why didn't John C. Young accept the apology from the Truckee-Donner Chamber of Commerce? His own father, Young Soong Quong, was made a refugee when anti-Chinese arsonists burned his community in 1887, one of the largest Chinatowns in California at that time. It was one year after the 1886 "Truckee Method" cruelly expelled its Chinese population, leading other communities to do the same.

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CHINESE RAILROAD WORKERS HONORED BY DEPARTMENT OF LABOR, WASHINGTON D.C., MAY 9, 2014

A great opportunity to make things right came in 2014. Chinese would have a plaque, a beautiful one in the Hall of Honor at the Department of Labor. It was the opportune moment, recognition of Chinese railroad workers during Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month in Washington, D.C. The efforts of Stanford's Chinese Railroad Workers in North America Project, headed by professors Gordon Chang and Shelley Fishkin, created widespread interest in the Chinese role on the Transcontinental, and Sue Lee, executive director of CHSA, seized the moment, leading the move for the Department of Labor to honor Chinese railroad workers. At last the legacy of Chinese railroad workers would be written in stone. Phil Choy's mission accomplished. What a perfect moment, an assemblage of descendants on stage, a superb keynote speech by Norman Mineta, and the audience of federal workers of all ethnicities. As spokesperson for the descendants, I was introduced by Secretary of Labor, Thomas Perez, the son of immigrants from the Dominican Republic and with Christopher Lu, Deputy Secretary of Labor, son of immigrants from Taiwan, did the unveiling of the commemorative plaque, CHINESE RAILROAD WORKERS.

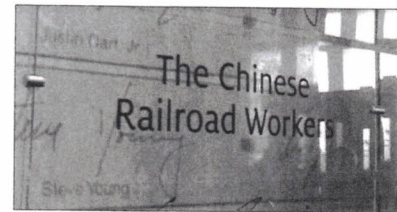
The message delivered that day was symbolic. Not only were Chinese workers honored, all Asian immigrant labor was honored, past and present, and Chinese were recognized as among the many immigrants who built America. That day in May at the D.O.L. we were united in spirit.

GOING BACKWARDS, GOING FORWARD

Changing history is like blasting through granite in the Sierra Nevada mountains, moving forward inches at a time. A couple years later after the first federal recognition of Chinese railroad workers, the overriding theme of the Administration is not America the land of immigrants, but "America First." The very word immigration evokes fear and loathing. We are experiencing a renewed surge of nativism. We feel it and we hear it. *Immigrants must go! They take jobs away! They are a threat to society. Build the wall!* And we witness travel bans and inhumane border policies. The "zero tolerance policy," separating children from their parents, evoked for me my grandmother's long detention on Angel Island.

In *The Week*, November 15, 2017, an image appears that continues the distortion of history of immigrants building America. That iconic photograph again by A.J. Russell, used in a book review in a national publication, with the misleading caption: "Completing the Union Pacific, 1869." And the subliminal message is the same as always: Americans are white people who do all the work.

Apparently, the culprit in the Chinese absence from the Golden Spike moment is the photograph of A.J. Russell, one of the most iconic images in U.S. history. Since there are no Chinese visible, it's the "all-American" moment. Were Chinese deliberately pushed out of the shot, or was it circumstantial that the Chinese are not in the photo? Or possibly were a few Chinese actually present, but faces obscured by the crowd?



Video by Rick Quan & Henry Faybusovich, CHSA

Commemorative plaque at the U.S. Department of Labor Hall of Honor, May 9, 2014.



Courtesy Connie Young Yu

Three descendants at the Hall of Labor honoring of Chinese Railroad Workers, May 9, 2014. (l to r) Carolyn Kuhn, Andrea Yee, Connie Young Yu.

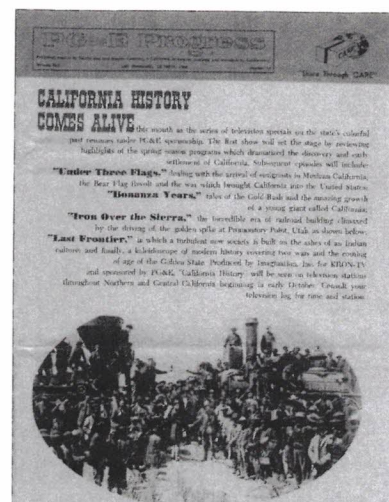
The point remains, Chinese workers were not part of the grand pageantry etched in American history. After the last rail was laid, the Chinese were expendable. Obviously, it was not one photograph that caused the exclusion of Chinese from the national consciousness. It was the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. It is what emboldened cities and towns across the U.S. to expel Chinese and destroy their homes so they could not return. It was the law. And it stayed in effect for 61 years, only to be repealed during World War II when U.S. and China were allies.

While the exclusion of Chinese from the celebrations at Promontory may not have been deliberate in 1869, it most certainly was a hundred years later in 1969. Deliberate, shameful, egregious, unforgiveable.

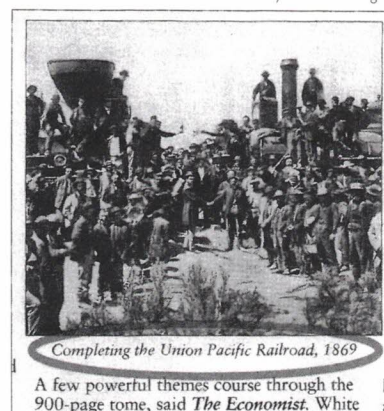
And so it goes on. The first transcontinental railroad is the touchstone we use for embracing our immigrant struggles and achievements. It is how we make the connection between past injustices and the present betrayals of our nation's ideals. The Centennial episode created an impetus for using our stories for social change. Celebrating the 150th anniversary in Promontory with Chinese railroad descendants as key participants is but another milestone in recovering our legacy in America. It is work that is never done.

NOTES

1. This story is told in "Detained at Liberty's Door," a video for CHSA by Barre Fong, 2010.
2. John C. Young (1912–1987) was a colonel in the U.S. Army Reserves. A World War II veteran and commander of Cathay Post of the American Legion, Young headed the project for the Chinese American war memorial in St. Mary's Square, dedicated to fallen Chinese Americans of World War I and World War II. Young was a soy sauce manufacturer (Wing Nien Longevity Brand) and was part-owner of Kan's and Ming's restaurants. He first knew Phil Choy as an architect, when he designed Ming's of Palo Alto.
3. "Golden Spike Special" was arranged by the Southern Pacific Railroad and the Pacific Coast Chapter of the Railway and Locomotive Historical Society. The route was from Sacramento to Ogden, Utah, with a scheduled stop at Truckee for program of historic re-enactments.
4. "Forgotten Men of the Golden Spike" by Dale Champion, *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 12, 1969.
5. "Heinlerville" was the name for the San Jose Chinatown built right after the Market Street Chinatown was burned by arson in 1887. John Heinlen, leased land for the Chinese to rebuild their community, despite vehement objection from the white citizenry. Heinlerville declined with the effects of the Chinese Exclusion Law, and was torn down in 1931. The site is in today's Japantown and being developed.



Courtesy Connie Young Yu



The Week, November 15, 2017

(top) PG&E Progress promotes California history in its October, 1968 issue, using the A.J. Russell photo, with no mention of Chinese railroad builders.

(above) Article from *The Week* with misleading caption, 2017.