



# Chinese Immigrants

China was a country torn by conflict in the 1800s. After the Opium Wars with England, China was devastated by poverty and famine. The country had experienced a long period of autocratic rule under the Qing dynasty, with a series of famines in the 1840s. The poverty that followed and religious differences were two of the causes of the Taiping Rebellion in 1850. This rebellion would last 20 years and cost nearly 30 million lives.

## GOLD MOUNTAIN DREAMS

In 1851, reports of gold came from the West, having been discovered at Sutter's Mill in 1848. Nearly 3,000 Chinese came to the U.S. in the

hopes of making their fortune. Like other immigrants, they hoped to send this money to families back home. They referred to the nearby city of San Francisco as Gim Saam, or "Gold Mountain" because of the wealth believed to exist there.

An  
"autocratic"  
government  
is one where  
unlimited power  
is held by a  
single person.

Many Chinese immigrants came from the southern provinces of Guangdong and Fujian. Many Chinese Americans today trace their ancestors to the Pearl River Delta in Guangdong Province. The south was strongly affected by the rebellion. Being near to the seaport of Hong Kong, inhabitants of these provinces had more opportunities to leave the country.

In 1910,  
women  
numbered only  
5% of the  
entire Chinese  
population in  
the U.S.

Almost all of those who left for America were men. There were several reasons for this. Limited economic resources kept many families from making the journey together. The United States frontier was believed dangerous. Those who made the journey thought it was safer and easier to support a family from across the ocean.

Immigrants often planned to bring their family over once they had settled. However, laws were later put in place to limit the number of Chinese people who could enter the country. This prevented many families from being reunited.

## TOWARDS THE WEST



Those who came to the U.S. began to develop communities that consisted of more than mining. The Chinese people also became merchants, students, artisans, and would later be one of the primary groups working on the transcontinental railroad.

4 out of 5 workers on the Central Pacific line through the Sierra Nevada were Chinese.

The westward movement of settlers and gold seekers emphasized the need for a transcontinental railroad. The Central Pacific Railroad began to lay track for a line to California. Little progress on the western end of it was made because of a scarcity of labor and the rugged terrain of the Sierra Nevada mountains. The Central Pacific hired Chinese

## WHY WASHINGTON?

workers, finding them successful in all phases of construction. These laborers leveled roadbeds, bored tunnels, blasted mountainsides and laid track for the railroad's completion.

The Central Pacific was not the only railroad interested in staking a claim to the Pacific Northwest. In 1873, the Northern Pacific decided to follow in its footsteps and hired 300 Chinese laborers to complete a line from Kalama to Tacoma. Many of these people chose to stay in Washington territory, forming communities and starting businesses. Railroad work was available mainly on a seasonal basis, from March to September. After this work had finished, many workers moved into other industries, such as salmon canning.

In the beginning, this situation was acceptable to Euro-American workers. As long as the bulk of Chinese laborers remained in menial employment, they were not seen as a threat to the job market. In 1883, the country fell into a depression. As finding work became more and more difficult for all citizens, resentment against Chinese labor began to rise among part of the population.

In the late 19th century, there were over 100 incidents of anti-Chinese violence in the Pacific Northwest.

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The Toone family (also known as the James family) of Olympia, Washington is pictured above as photographed in the 1890s. Jim Ah Toone took possession of the Gold Bar restaurant in Olympia on March 8, 1892. The Gold Bar was the meeting place of the first Territorial Legislature of Washington in 1852.

Expulsions resulted in the forced departure of the Chinese people from the communities of Tacoma and Black Diamond in the 1880s. Despite this and other hardships, many of those who had come to Washington chose to stay, strengthening their communities through civic action.

## ONLINE

The West the Railroads Made

<http://www.washingtonhistoryonline.org>

This website features resources about the Chinese Expulsion in Washington state and nationwide. Visit the "Chinese Immigrants in the West", "Run Out on the Rails They Built", or "The Tacoma Method" pages to find out more about this topic.

## IN PRINT

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Washington State History Museum, 2007

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