

CHINESE IN PRESCOTT AND THE WEST - FROM RAILROADS TO RESTAURANTS

By Elisabeth F. Ruffner

There could not have been a greater effect on an immigrant culture in this country than the federal acts which permitted Chinese men to work on building the railroads in the West during the nineteenth century. The federal acts allowed them to locate along the lines proposed in the Territory of Arizona, the Southern Pacific in the south, and the Atlantic and Pacific (later named the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe) in the north. Early surveys located the best routes and the land grants assisted in developing the lines. The die was cast!

With the completion of the railroad construction, further acts of Congress permitted certain persons to remain, and soon Chinese wives were brought from the homeland and businesses and families established. The Chinese people carefully guarded their culture wherever they settled, but soon became an important influence in the growing economy. They held jobs as house servants, as superior cooks (often running their own restaurants), and as gardeners. Production of fruits and vegetables, which they sold to home owners and restaurants, assisted the economy, as well the manufacture of clothing.

However, many of the wealthier, enterprising Chinese immigrants made land purchases. Mercantile establishments occurred in many locations. In Prescott, during the first sale of lots ordered by the federal government to benefit the newly established town, was a purchaser by the name of Quon Clong Gin. He owned a lot on the east side of Granite Street. This man was probably a part of the Chinese emigrant departure in the mid-nineteenth century, fleeing a troubled economy and political scene. Two men, Sam Lee and Ah Fork, owned a saloon on Lynx Creek, east of Prescott, where they panned for gold. The property was formerly owned by Mary Ramos, who later settled on Granite Creek in Prescott, establishing one of the first places in the town buy food and



drink.

A pioneer merchant, T.W. Otis, became known as “Uncle” to the Chinese. Mr. Otis, founder of the Congregational Church in the area, organized a class teaching English and religion to these young men. One of these eager learners, Jon Con Sang, known as Charley Wan, was baptized and became affiliated with the church. He returned to China and became known as one of the great Christian laymen of that country. He created an immensely wealthy dynasty of retail stores, founding chapels, schools and hospitals with his family of six children.

A great-grand daughter of that Chinese man returned to Prescott with her family and visited Sharlot Hall Museum, where she found family photographs they had never seen. Diana Cheng Yue was able to show her grandchildren the first generations of their distinguished family. These three children, the first of the family born in America, were introduced to their ancestors in rare photographs in the museum archives.

One little known incident of Prescott’s long history with the Chinese people occurred during the overthrow of the Manchu Dynasty. The first president of the Republic of China on the island of Taiwan in the 1940s was Sun Yat Sen who lived in exile in Prescott from 1895 until 1911.