

Chinese Americans and the Transcontinental Railroad Part 4 - Nevada to Promontory Point, Utah 1867-1869

By Philip Chin

The Union Pacific and the Central Pacific Railroads were fierce rivals in the race to complete the Transcontinental Railroad. At stake were government subsidies and land that would today be measured in the billions of dollars, the personal fortunes of the stakeholders, and the prestige of helping the nation fulfill the dream of Manifest Destiny, an unbroken United States stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean. The Central Pacific commenced building track from the eastern foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains into Nevada, even while they were still struggling inch by painful inch to build the numerous tunnels through the mountain summit in order not to let the Union Pacific get further ahead. They were slowed by a smallpox epidemic that struck in December 1868-January 1869 but forged on through Nevada and into Utah.

The Coup Against Dr. Durant

The railroad owners had little interest in the welfare of their workers, regardless of race and creed. Workers only had to be kept in good enough health to work and remain obedient to the railroad at the right price, which was as cheaply as possible. As Charles Crocker made clear in his 1876 Congressional testimony he had no interest in the race of his workers and even thought that the Chinese would make good American citizens, a personal stand which stood directly against conventional American wisdom and public opinion of the time. Crocker's numerous asides and expressions of contempt about the propensity of lower-class white workers to get drunk on paydays and miss work and his contrasting example of the hardworking and sober Chinese reflected his sense of order and desire for profit. All of the decisions of these railway bosses, whether it was about labor, corporate governance, and in their relations with government, were made on a profit basis that stood above any concerns about race, religion, or nationality. An equal unconcern was sometimes shown for their own business partners, most notably by the leader of the Union Pacific.

Dr. Thomas Durant held the position of Vice-President of the Union Pacific and President of Crédit Mobilier of America, the company tasked with all construction activity for the Union Pacific. His increasingly rapacious assaults on the finances of the Union Pacific Railroad by charging exorbitant construction fees on behalf of Crédit Mobilier, had been tolerated for many years by the board of directors of the Union Pacific and Crédit Mobilier. The two corporations secretly shared the same owners after all. Crédit Mobilier's main purpose was to take as much money out of the Union Pacific as possible. The Union Pacific was in reality a bankrupt shell corporation, with Crédit Mobilier taking the money and then protecting their secret owners from the inevitable legal and financial repercussions behind a corporate veil. Durant's sudden changes to design orders and constant hectoring to add many miles of unneeded tracks to get more money from US

Government subsidies and land grants had long been a source of frustration to Chief Engineer Grenville Dodge. Dodge would often find his work orders changed by Durant and his authority undermined and questioned. But such annoyances were allowed as long as Durant made his fellow board members and shareholders rich. By 1866, Durant, was launching and threatening lawsuits against the Union Pacific to deliberately slow down construction. This was Durant's effort to extort the other directors into paying him even more money to increase his own profits at their expense.

In a boardroom coup, a majority of directors ousted Durant as President of Crédit Mobilier and member of the board and installed Congressman Oakes Ames, a Republican Representative from Massachusetts. Oakes Ames held a seat on the House Committee on Railroads and was thus very influential over US Government policies towards the railroads. His brother, Oliver Ames, Jr., was appointed as President of the Union Pacific, a position that Dr. Durant had been aspiring to. Between them, the Ames Brothers had invested \$1 million of their family fortune into the Union Pacific in 1865 and raised an additional \$1.5 million in credit by pledging their manufacturing business to save the railroad from a serious cash crunch as construction ramped up at the end of the Civil War. Translated into modern terms, they risked about half a billion dollars and personal financial ruin on the railroad. As Chief Engineer Grenville Dodge would say about them, "Nothing but the faith and pluck of the Ameses, fortified with their extensive credit, carried the thing through." The Ames Brothers proved not to be powerful enough to resist some of the other board members who brought Dr. Durant back to the Board of Directors of Crédit Mobilier in 1867, but Durant's power to obstruct railroad building was eliminated.

Oakes Ames' innovation that he started in December 1867 was to offer discounted shares of Crédit Mobilier to his fellow members of Congress to win their favorable approval of legislation providing greater government funding for the railroads and to overlook whatever transgressions came to their attention. With the frenzied hype the stock was generating in public the discounted stocks could then be sold at three to four hundred times what they'd been bought for. As the construction and management company for the Union Pacific, Crédit Mobilier was reaping great profits and paying high dividends to investors, up to 500%, but they weren't a publicly traded stock. This exclusive mystique added to the prestige and allure of owning shares in the company. The Union Pacific, meanwhile, continued to overcharge the government and also borrow as many funds as possible on company credit, then funneled the money to Crédit Mobilier, and from there to board members and select stockholders.

The Crédit Mobilier Scandal broke out in September 1872 when a New York newspaper printed damaging letters from Ames provided by a disgruntled associate who'd felt cheated out of his promised shares. This led to hasty House and Senate investigations that many would later claim were never sufficiently pursued. About thirty politicians were named as possibly being involved in the scandal but most of them were not deeply looked into before being exonerated or excused. Seven House members were named as possibly having deeper involvement including James G. Blaine (R-ME), the Speaker of the House of Representatives, and James A. Garfield (R-OH), the future President of the United States. The only House members to be punished through censure were Oakes Ames and

James Brooks (D-NY) in February 1873. Brooks had denied any involvement but documentary and eyewitness testimony showed that he'd blatantly lied and was heavily involved in the scheme. He died two months later in April. Oakes Ames died in May.

The House also submitted several names to the Senate for investigation, but without any recommendation as to what the Senate should do about them. Every politician in Washington was by this time trying his best to run away from the growing scandal. The list included eight senators including James Patterson (R-NH) and Henry Wilson (R-MA). Also included was Vice-President Schuyler Colfax (R-IN). Only one, Senator Patterson, was eventually brought up on any charges by the Senate. Vice-President Colfax was not re-nominated as running mate for Ulysses S. Grant's second term in office and his political career was ruined by the affair even though he was never charged. Ironically, Senator Henry Wilson was elected as Vice-President of the United States to replace Colfax. Wilson blamed his wife for investing in *Crédit Mobilier* (on his advice no less) and claimed that he'd gotten the investment money back from Ames, then paid his wife the additional amount from his own pocket that Ames told him the stock would have earned if he'd kept it. Wilson was issued a mild reprimand in the Congressional report for claiming during his race for vice-president that he'd never known anything about *Crédit Mobilier* or anyone involved in the scandal. President Grant would serve out his miserable second term beset by questions about *Crédit Mobilier*, other cases of government corruption, notably in the Office of Indian Affairs, as well as the collapse of the stock markets and the American economy in the Panic of 1873.

Senator James Patterson claimed he was unaware that he'd ever owned \$3000 of *Crédit Mobilier* stock. Oakes Ames provided receipts, check, and a letter bearing Senator Patterson's signature and in his handwriting that was clearly marked as transactions involving shares of *Crédit Mobilier* and the Union Pacific Railroad. "The Senate committee... concluded that Patterson, as a U.S. senator, knowingly arranged with Representative Ames 'for the purchase of thirty shares in the stock of the *Crédit Mobilier* of America at rates greatly below its esteemed value,' obtained the stock, received the dividends on it, and later bought and sold Union Pacific stock, knowing about the relations between the two companies and about Ames' involvement in them. He also knew that Ames' goal was to influence his actions as a senator in relation to the two companies. The committee therefore charged in its February 27, 1873, report to the Senate that Patterson knowingly gave false testimony to both the House and Senate committees. It unanimously recommended that he be expelled." With the expiration of his term in office on March 3rd, the expulsion proceedings against Patterson ended with no action being taken.

The whole thing was then blamed on just a few bad individuals led by Oakes Ames and Thomas Durant despite the extent to which the entire American business and political structure had been exposed as corrupt and uncaring of the affects their economic schemes had on the economy and on ordinary workers. In the following decades of economic pain and turmoil that followed though it became far easier to blame immigration and especially the Chinese as playing a major role in the unemployment troubles of whites.

<http://www.up.com/aboutup/history/individuals/index.htm>

http://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/expulsion_cases/o64.JamesPatterson_expulsion.htm

http://cpr.org/Museum/Credit_Mobilier_1873.html

The Race through Nevada to Utah

As the race developed between the two railroads the contest received more and more publicity, enthralling newspapers and their readers across the United States. In an age before television or radio, contests, races, and feats of all kinds were the subjects of great interest and of outlandish bets that were amply covered by the newspapers of the day. Which railroad's workers could lay the most track in one day: the Irishmen of the Union Pacific or the Chinese of the Central Pacific?

National prestige and company bragging rights were at stake, but also racial pride as well. The Irish, despite lingering prejudices against them in American society, had won a place for themselves in America in the nearly forty years since they'd started coming to America in large numbers. They were now in the halls of Congress and positions of power across the United States, as well as forming a growing part of the middle class in America. But the community was still troubled by memories of the violence and anti-Irish attitudes of the 1830s as well as continuing discrimination by upper-class Americans. The Chinese, always regarded as aliens in America, were people that many Irish Americans feared and resented as threats to their newly won respectable jobs and positions in America. These fears had been encouraged by the Central Pacific in order to break strikes, keep wages low, and most importantly, keep the workers from organizing together for better wages and working conditions.

Financial reasons, as always, played an even bigger role for the railroads. Federal law only mandated that construction be completed by 1875, but the debt taken on by each railroad was continuing to compound interest at an alarming rate. The Central Pacific in particular was badly burdened by the costs of the tunnels and track over the mountains. The continued maintenance of the mountain route would also cost them a fortune. To be commercially viable to the public (ignoring the financial dealings that were already secretly bankrupting both railroads) the race to Utah had to be won to control the riches of trade from the Great Salt Lake to either coast.

At least \$2 million was paid to the Mormons and their leader Brigham Young, both for the additional Mormon labor needed to speed railway construction through Utah as well as to win their cooperation. The Union Pacific eventually had to provide \$600,000 worth of rolling stock to the Mormon-controlled Utah Central Railroad to make up for the lack of cash to pay them with. That railroad ran from Salt Lake City to the Union Pacific terminus in Ogden, Utah. To avoid the tricky salt flats east of Salt Lake City that would have delayed construction, the Union Pacific decided to go north from Ogden around the northern part of the Great Salt Lake instead of south towards Salt Lake City, the biggest city in Utah and the headquarters of the Mormon Church. This decision infuriated Brigham Young until he learned that the Central Pacific was also building along the northern route as well.

http://www.cr.nps.gov/history/online_books/hh/40/hh40n.htm

Under the terms of Congress each railroad was entitled to lay claim to land 300 miles in advance of their current tracks in order to grade the land and prepare it for track building. Each company used the law to undercut the other company by laying claims to land along railroad routes ahead of their rival. They also used their paid lobbyists to sabotage bills making their way through Congress that would have given advantages to the other company. The rivalry became so intense that it even led to the ridiculous spectacle of rival railway grading parties passing each other and working far into territory that was already covered by the other railroad.

The Deseret Evening News of Salt Lake City reported on March 25, 1869, "From what I can observe and hear from others, there is considerable opposition between the two railroad companies, both lines run near each other, so near that in one place the UP are taking a four feet cut out of the CP fill to finish their grade, leaving the CP to fill the cut thus made in the formation of their grade."

http://cpr.org/Museum/Chinese_Laborers.html

Each railroad hoped to have Congress decide that their route was the official one, thus winning subsidies and land grants over their rival. It is estimated that both companies combined wasted over \$1 million (about \$260 million today) just on grading land that ended up never being used for tracks. Grading work with explosives was even conducted nearly side by side without any warning to the other railroad's workers. These explosions were extremely dangerous as potentially lethal debris was scattered up to half a mile in some explosions. It was reported that after a couple hair-raising episodes of this the engineers hastily agreed to warn the other side when blasting would occur. No casualties were reported though. Common laborers such as the Chinese and Irish railroad workers were regarded as disposable parts of the industrial machinery. The dangers to them and their views about the matter weren't considered important enough to be reported by anyone.

http://www.cr.nps.gov/history/online_books/hh/40/hh40n.htm

The real and far more dangerous story behind this episode was only told long afterwards by Grenville M. Dodge, Chief Engineer of the Union Pacific, in his memoirs, ***How We Built the Union Pacific and Other Railway Papers and Addresses***, Monarch Printing Company, Council Bluffs, Iowa, unknown printing date circa 1909

<https://archive.org/stream/howwebuiltunionpoododgrich#page/28/mode/2up>

The Central Pacific had made wonderful progress coming east, and we abandoned the work from Promontory to Humboldt Wells, bending all our efforts to meet them at Promontory. Between Ogden and Promontory each company graded a line, each running side by side, and in some places one line was above the other. The laborers upon the Central Pacific were Chinamen, while ours were Irishmen, and there was much ill-feeling between them. Our Irishmen were in the habit of firing their blasts in the cuts without giving warning to the Chinamen on the Central Pacific working right above them. From this cause several Chinamen were extremely hurt. Complaint was made to me by the Central Pacific people, and I endeavored to have the contractors bring all hostilities to a close, but, for some reason

or other, they failed to do so. One day the Chinamen, appreciating the situation, put in what is called a "grave" on their work and when the Irishmen right under them were all at work let go their blast and buried several of our men. This brought about a truce at once. From that time the Irish laborers showed due respect for the Chinamen, and there was no further trouble.

Grenville Dodge and Colis Huntington met in Washington DC on April 9th and came to an agreement to settle the differences between the two companies. Each would agree to share the Great Basin with a meeting spot between the railroads as Promontory Summit, Utah, 56 miles west of Ogden. Congress agreed on a joint resolution that endorsed this agreement the next day. No mention was made of injured or dead workers as a result of the conflict.

Jack Casement's men of the Union Pacific beat his boast of being able to lay five miles of track a day by laying six. The Central Pacific responded by laying seven. Starting at three in the morning and working to midnight, the Union Pacific laid down 7 1/2 miles of track to grab the record again. Charles Crocker waited until the tracks neared completion in Utah in 1869 to insure that the Central Pacific would forever hold the record. Rails, ties, and other materials were prepositioned for weeks. A graded railway bed had been prepared by about 4,000 Chinese workers with a few whites ahead of time. For the rail-laying party itself a picked group of eight Irishmen was selected. One obvious intention was to have the Irish known individually by name in history for beating the record instead of the Chinese workers who would forever remain anonymous. The work started at 7 a.m. on April 27, 1869. A continuous stream of train cars brought up supplies to each materials yard, each train brought up two miles worth of materials at a time with subsequent trains delivering their loads further up the line as it was built. Horses and men raced forward delivering fresh supplies in front of the railhead from each material yard. Several hundred Chinese worked frantically ahead of the Irishmen preparing the way for them by laying and spiking the ties into place, shoveling gravel as ballast under the ties to keep them evenly supported, and making sure construction was going in a straight line. A telegraph wire up on poles was constructed right alongside the tracks as quickly as they were being laid. Years of meticulous planning and practice were now paying off as everyone knew what they were doing and when to be there.

As a correspondent from the Alta, a San Francisco newspaper observed, "I timed the movement twice and found the speed to be as follows: The first time 240 feet of rail was laid in one minute and twenty seconds; the second time 240 feet was laid in one minute and fifteen seconds. This is about as fast as a leisurely walk and as fast as the early ox teams used to travel over the plains." Each rail weighed about 560 pounds and required 5 men to carry and fit into place. "In all, there were brought up and placed 25,800 ties, 3,520 rails, 55,000 spikes, 7,040 poles, and 14,080 bolts, a total of 4,362,000 pounds. The distance was ten miles and 200 feet."

The work was completed at 7 p.m., a total of 12 hours. It was reported that Vice-President Durant of the Union Pacific lost a \$10,000 bet over the feat to Charles Crocker.

http://cpr.org/Museum/Southern_Pacific_Bulletin/Ten_Mile_Day.html

"The Golden Spike"

The ceremony completing the Transcontinental Railroad was scheduled on May 8, 1869 but it was delayed for two days due to flash flooding, repairs, and the rough terrain that the Union Pacific was building through along their portion. They had to build a wooden trestle bridge 85 feet high and 400 feet long nicknamed "The Big Trestle" to temporarily make the connection across a canyon to meet the deadline until they could go back and take their time filling in the gap. Dr. Thomas Durant was also kidnapped by angry unpaid workers and \$80,000 had to be hastily wired to pay them since the workers threatened to kill Durant otherwise.

By May 10th the Chinese workers of the Central Pacific had been moved westwards back a few miles from Promontory Summit to camps at Victory. Likewise, the Irish workers of the Union Pacific had been moved east a few miles to their camps. Amos L. Bowsher, general foreman for telegraphic construction for the Central Pacific, described the scene he witnessed on May 10, 1869 in an article written in 1926, "It was certainly a cosmopolitan gathering. Irish and Chinese laborers who had set records in track laying that have never since been equaled joined with the cowboys, Mormons, miners and Indians in celebrating completion of the railroad. There were even some high silk hats among the distinguished visitors from the East and West." An unexpected trainload of soldiers also added themselves to the raucous gathering, helpfully holding back the crowds at the direction of their officers to let the railroad workers and photographers do their work. <http://cpr.org/Museum/Farrar/pictures/2005-03-09-02-02.html>

To fill the gap of two rail lengths left between the tracks the day before a ceremonial party of eight workers from each railroad was brought up in the morning. A specially made and polished laurel tie was laid down just for the ceremony and the Chinese created holes in it with an auger for the inexperienced dignitaries to drop the ceremonial spikes in. The Irish laid their rail first. Then the Chinese laid down their rail. The various special ceremonial spikes made of gold and silver presented by citizens, businesses, and politicians from the various states were then fitted. Leland Stanford lightly tapped a golden spike and Dr. Thomas Durant lightly tapped a silver one, each using a ceremonial silver sledge. For the real blows to the final spike in the laurel tie they used a regular iron spike and sledge. Both men missed much to the hilarity of the crowd.

The iron spike was wired up to a telegraph and the taps were transmitted and heard across the United States setting off celebrations nationwide. Strobridge, and his counterpart, Reed, as construction superintendents for their respective railroads, then hammered the final spike completely in. Once the ceremonies were over the Chinese retrieved the polished laurel rail tie for exhibition (the tie was later destroyed by the 1906 San Francisco Earthquake and Fire) and replaced it with a standard pine wood tie with ordinary iron spikes. A reporter from the San Francisco Newsletter described what happened as the crowd of onlookers went after souvenirs, "That [replaced tie] was immediately attacked by hundreds of jack knives and soon reduced to a mere stick. The ever watchful Chinese then took the remains, sawed into small pieces and distributed to the spectators. The

Chinese really laid the last tie and drove the last spike. When we last saw the spot, soldiers were hammering away at the flanges of the rails and carried off all the pieces they could break, so that a new rail would soon be necessary. Six ties and two rails were demolished before the juncture was left in peace to the slower inroads of time."
http://cpr.org/Museum/Chinese_at_Promontory_ETS.html

Controversially, the pictures taken of the ceremony by the official photographer and the one best known to history failed to clearly show a single Chinese present although at least one possible individual has been suggested as being Chinese. Possibly that person may have had his back to the camera or his facial details are nearly impossible to make out in the grainy photo. The only picture that most likely shows Chinese attending the ceremony appears to be have been taken as they were adjusting the final rail into place. Since no faces are visible, this identification is based upon their distinctive style of clothing and the contemporary photo label, "Chinese Laying last Rail UPRR"
http://cpr.org/Museum/Chinese.html#Russell_539

The absence of visible Chinese from the best known photograph appears to have been an oversight in what was by all accounts a chaotic and mostly unplanned ceremony. James Strobridge, the Superintendent of Construction for the Central Pacific, had invited them to join him for a meal in his dining car with other guests during the time the famous photo was being taken just after the ceremony was concluded. The Sacramento Daily Bee of May 12, 1869 reported that, "J.H. Strobridge, when the work was all over, invited the Chinese who had been brought over from Victory for that purpose, to dine at his boarding car. When they entered, all the guests and officers present cheered them as the chosen representatives of the race which have greatly helped to build the road....a tribute they well deserved and which evidently gave them much pleasure."
http://cpr.org/Museum/Chinese_at_Promontory_ETS.html

As Gordon H. Chang and Shelley Fisher Fishkin, professors at Stanford University, and Co-Directors of the Chinese Railroad Workers in North America Project, expressed it, "At Promontory Point, the company did honor the Chinese workers when it invited representatives to meet its executives in a special rail car to express their appreciation for their work. However at that moment, Andrew J. Russell took what has become the iconic photograph of the meeting of the two lines. Two massive locomotives face each other and scores of white men gather in celebration. No Chinese is in sight. Erased as it were, though accidentally, from public view ever since."
<http://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesasia/2014/05/12/the-chinese-helped-build-america/>

The absence of the Chinese in the famous photo helped to erase them from the history of the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad, one of the most monumental feats of engineering in the 19th Century. This remains a continuing sore point for Chinese Americans.

Whatever gratitude was felt towards the Chinese workers of the Central Pacific Railroad was completely fleeting. Only a few hundred Chinese were kept on to work on further sections of the railroad. The majority in their thousands were let go to fend for themselves. Some found work with the Union Pacific. Many walked the entire distance of about eight hundred miles to San Francisco or scattered to work across the Western

states. It was far too expensive for them to buy passenger tickets on the Central Pacific Railroad anyway even though the railroad had promised the workers a free ride back to San Francisco when they were hired. A first-class ticket to New York in May 1869 cost \$123.50, the equivalent to around \$33,000 today. A schedule published in October 1869 showed the first-class rate to New York had fallen to \$112.50 (about \$29,000 today) and the second-class rate was \$52.50 (about \$14,000 today). What had taken six months or longer to travel by wagon train now took a total of six days but it was still very expensive all the same.

http://www.sacramentohistory.org/admin/photo/271_760.pdf

http://cpr.org/Museum/Ephemera/CPRR_Schedule_1869.html

On May 27, 1869, the San Francisco Chronicle, as reprinted in the New York Times, reported "Chinese Laborers for the Southern States." 20,000 Chinese had been hired to work on plantations in Tennessee. The Chronicle said that, "The very faithful and intelligent manner the Chinese laborers performed their work in constructing the Central Pacific Railroad has attracted attention to this unsurpassed class of rough laborers." The article ended optimistically, "Pretty soon, if this demand goes on, California will be cleared of all the Chinese laborers."

<http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?res=990CE6D61F31EF34BC4053DFB1668382679FDE>

As it was hundreds of Chinese at best worked on the plantations of the South and not for long. Eager Southerners were anxious to replace freed African American slaves with Chinese in the aftermath of the Civil War but Chinese treated as slaves simply ran away in the night and most never returned. If they did return they ended up generally as shopkeepers, the only ones willing to deal and work with African Americans.

More ominously, the New York Times published an article on June 29, 1869 with the title of "John Chinaman- What Shall We do with Him?" The Times advocated open immigration saying, "We say of John Chinaman, therefore, let him come, and let him work as hard, and live as cheaply as he pleases." But the article pointed to the darker attitudes towards Chinese that were already prevalent in California and the West Coast and would become increasingly dominant across the United States in the next decades, "...as the favorite remedy against 'negro supremacy' was once slavery, or lacking that oppression, hanging at the lamp post, or shooting at sight, so similar means have been hitherto employed against 'Chinese supremacy' in California."

[http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-](http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?res=9D06E2DC103AEF34BC4151DFB0668382679FDE)

[free/pdf?res=9D06E2DC103AEF34BC4151DFB0668382679FDE](http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?res=9D06E2DC103AEF34BC4151DFB0668382679FDE)

The Death Toll

The total deaths of the Chinese laborers working on the project are at best educated guesses. The railroad was mostly indifferent to casualties as most American businesses were at the time. The newspapers reported most worker deaths in a matter of fact way without expressing any outrage or conveying a sense that things could be any different. Such deaths were evidently regarded as a normal part of business by reporters and the public. In the 19th Century there were no occupational health and safety rules, investigations into workplace deaths, or an outraged public pushing for reforms. Most businesses only cared when so many workers died or equipment was damaged that it

slowed down production and cut into profits. Calls for change usually only followed horrific accidents which were deemed newsworthy in some way either because of great numbers of dead or some sensational aspect of it. Such outrage was generally quickly forgotten. In addition the ordinary Chinese and whites working on the project were contract workers from labor gangs, not direct employees of the railroad. Presumably the labor boss would keep records of the deaths and injuries, but none of those records have survived.

We know that the Chinese were relatively free from many of the waterborne diseases that plagued the Irish workers in the camps of the Union Pacific. The Chinese habit of drinking tea meant that all the water they used was boiled first killing the main causes of such bacterial illnesses as cholera and dysentery. We also know that the Chinese diet was more varied and healthier than the Irish worker diet of boiled potatoes, boiled beef, bread, and coffee. The Chinese imported dried goods from China through San Francisco and Sacramento including rice. They also bought seafood, vegetables, and kept live chickens and pigs for weekend meals. They also bathed before dinner everyday, even if it consisted only of a lukewarm spongebath. By contrast, the rolling shelters of the railroad workers of the Union Pacific were known to be particularly filled with vermin and smelly because the men were overcrowded and took no care of their personal hygiene. As one veteran of the Union Pacific railway crews said in the PBS series American Experience episode about the building of the Transcontinental Railroad, "To tell the truth, we were troubled by 'cooties.'"

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/tcrr-uprr/>

We know Chinese were killed in the frequent avalanches that struck the Sierra Nevada Mountains and some were recorded as having frozen to death or died from a smallpox epidemic, but none of these figures are ever cited with certainty. The avalanche deaths of 1866 for example cite a figure somewhere between "15 and 20 Chinese" which is hardly the mark of an eyewitness to the event. Similar inexactitude marks other deaths as well. A massacre of Chinese railroad workers by Native Americans was reported in oral histories in Idaho, but the figures for the dead range anywhere from 100 to 300 dead. Again, it's impossible to say who was correctly cited or even if the incident really happened since nobody to this date has dug up any physical or official documentary evidence of such an event. Perhaps no official cared enough to bother recording it because they were Chinese, it never happened, or nobody has yet looked for the evidence about it.

The late William F. Chew, who was the first to look at the actual paper records of the Central Pacific Railroad to estimate the number of Chinese workers on the project documented 146 fatalities plus another possible 1,200 dead. Other Chinese American historians have also quoted the 1,200 figure. But this number appears to have been based upon a single contemporary newspaper, the Sacramento Reporter of June 30, 1870 which ran an article entitled, "BONES IN TRANSIT. — The accumulated bones of perhaps 1,200 Chinamen came in by the eastern train yesterday from along the line of the Central Pacific Railroad. The lot comprises about 20,000 pounds. Nearly all of them are the remains of employees of the company, who were engaged in building the road. The religious customs of the Celestial Empire require that, whenever possible, the bones of its subjects shall be

interred upon its own soil, and the strictness with which this custom is observed is something remarkable."

On the same day the Sacramento Union reported, "BONES OF DEFUNCT CHINAMEN — The Central Pacific freight train last evening brought to the city the bones of about fifty defunct Chinamen who died from disease or were killed by accident while working on the line of the Central Pacific Railroad. They are to be interred in Conboie's private cemetery, as have been already the bodies of about one hundred others similarly deceased."

Were the newspapers talking about the same train or two different trains? Did each article omit some crucial facts, one omitting bodies going back to China and the other only mentioning those being offloaded in Sacramento? Were most of the bodies really from rail workers of the Central Pacific? We know that Chinese customs of the time mandated that all Chinese men be returned to China for burial. This practice had started long before the railroads had even started being built. Likely any shipment of bodies could have included many Chinese who were in no other way involved with the railroad. We also have the fact that 19th Century journalism was an inexact thing. Reporters often exaggerated their coverage of events to drum up interest and sales for their newspapers. Many arguments online have resulted about what is true and untrue about Chinese casualty figures.

The very inexactitude of the number of officially accounted deaths that range between 100 to 300 points to how dubious the official information sources are. Likewise the highest figures are equally dubious. One problem with believing that 1,200 or 1,346 died is that this would have constituted 10% or more of the total Central Pacific workforce. Could such a horrific death toll been completely overlooked and not mentioned by the railroad, numerous engineers, newspapers, and residents? It seems unlikely but as long as the deaths didn't occur in large groups then it might have been possible. Total traffic deaths each year in America pass with little to no notice by the general public even though they exceed the combined death toll of some American wars. Such accidents generally kill in such small numbers, one or two at a time that few people remark upon them. It is only when you add them up in the yearly statistics does the horror reveal itself. Unfortunately, all the documentary and physical evidence about just how many Chinese died while building the Transcontinental Railroad is obscured by the passage of time and the general indifference of anyone towards keeping proper accounts of workplace deaths in the 19th Century.

<http://cpr.org/Museum/FAQs.html#Died>

"The Golden Spike" Revisited

Far away from the glittering ceremony on April 9th honoring the Chinese workers at the Department of Labor in Washington DC in 2014, another ceremony took place the next day on the actual 145th anniversary at Promontory Point, Utah. It featured two 19th Century American trains, replicas of the ones in 1869, drawn up exactly as their

predecessors would have been on the same spots that day. Instead of railroad executives, soldiers, and other white people, the people crowded on the locomotives in celebration were a few descendants of Chinese railroad workers, friends, and other Chinese. [Corky Lee](#), a Chinese American photographer from New York City attending to take pictures described the result "as an act of photographic justice." Never before had the Chinese been invited to participate in previous reenactments of the Golden Spike ceremony simply because the well-known photographic record had plainly shown they "weren't part of that ceremony." Perhaps somewhere a few of the shades of those long ago forgotten Chinese railroad workers found a measure of historical justice among their descendants.

<http://www.sltrib.com/sltrib/news/57924758-78/chinese-amp-railroad-utah.html.csp>

1/26/16