Forgotten Pioneers
The Chinese in Montana
A fabulous assemblage of textiles, ceramics, and cultural treasures is featured in the Montana Historical Society’s exhibit that explores the story of Montana’s sojourning Chinese, Our Forgotten Pioneers. The exhibit is the culmination of nearly four years of research and planning intended to not only unravel an important, little-understood story and bring it to the forefront, but also to honor these tenacious and resilient pioneers.

Our Forgotten Pioneers focuses on the primarily male population that first arrived in Montana during the 1860s gold rushes; by 1870, Chinese comprised 10 percent of the territorial population. But sorting out this story is challenging. Language barriers and prejudice prevented the intermingling of Chinese with other immigrant groups. The population was also temporary, as the vast majority of men returned to their families in China. Time erased mining and railroad camps, city neighborhoods fell vacant, and Urban Renewal programs swept away cultural remains. For these reasons, the material culture of the Chinese in Montana has been poorly understood.

The story of Montana’s sojourning Chinese begins with gold discoveries in California in 1848. Word traveled quickly across the Pacific to the coast of southern China and Guangdong (Canton) Province. The news coincided with political upheaval, famine, overpopulation, and the Taiping Rebellion (1840–1862) that claimed 20 million lives. Within months, the first Chinese, almost exclusively young men, left their homes and families for California in search of Gum Saan, “Land of Golden Mountains.” Like most everyone who joined the gold rush, they hoped to make their fortunes. By 1851, twenty-five thousand Chinese had entered California.

New discoveries drew California miners—including many Chinese—to Nevada, Colorado, Idaho, and elsewhere. When gold was discovered in 1862 at Grasshopper Creek, idle miners along Idaho’s Salmon River rushed to the new strike in what would later become Montana. Chinese were certainly among them.

Overseas Chinese almost exclusively spoke Cantonese. Language, customs, and sometimes city ordinances bound them together, and Chinese settlements, or “Chinatowns,” sprang up in most urban communities. Montana’s Chinese population peaked in 1890, numbering 2,532; only 59 were women. A very few eventually brought their families to Montana, but the predominantly male population dwindled in the twentieth century.

The Chinese presence in Montana has become the stuff of myth and legend. Our Forgotten Pioneers traces the emerging story of the Chinese who helped lay the cornerstones of the new territory. Although they bore racial slurs and cruel stereotyping, Chinese made significant contributions to the development of mining, transportation, and commerce in Montana.

Our Forgotten Pioneers was a cross-program collaboration. Museum registrar Rowena Harrington and interpretive historian Ellen Baumler worked together as co-curators to craft the story. Exhibit designer Roberta Jones-Wallace and preparator Todd Saarinen transformed the vision into an extraordinary venue for displaying more than three hundred artifacts and objects. Education specialist Deb Mitchell assembled outstanding interactive elements.

(left) Chinese miners operate a sluice box to mine for gold in Alder Gulch circa 1869–1871. W. H. Jackson, photographer, MHS Photograph Archives, Helena, Lot 26 B6 F10

(overleaf) This elaborately embroidered vest is thought to have been worn by a Chinese scholar.
Unearthing Montana’s Chinese

Much of what we know about Montana’s Chinese comes from what they left behind. Because so many returned to China and because of the language barrier, it is only recently that archaeologists have begun to unravel some of the mysteries. For example, excavations in the 1980s at German Gulch in Silver Bow County, where several dozen Chinese worked mining claims from 1870 to the 1880s, yielded thousands of artifacts, but there was no ceramic typology and no systematic identification or classification of Chinese artifacts in Montana. The artifacts shown here represent recent advances.

Ceramic types

University of Montana and U.S. Forest Service archaeologists teamed up in the mid-2000s to identify Chinese sites in national forests. Excavations of mining camps at China Gulch and Cedar Creek in Mineral County in 2007–2008 yielded enough ceramics to create a typology, or comparison, of the four most common types. Recognizing these can help archaeologists identify Chinese sites. The four most common types, here from excavations at Virginia City, Montana, are, clockwise from top, celadon, Four Seasons dinnerware, blue and white bamboo ware, and brown-glazed stoneware.

Go pieces

Go, a strategic board game something like chess, was popular in western Chinatowns. The game pieces are commonly found in archaeological excavations of Chinese sites.

Funs tray

Red-light districts and Chinatowns were usually close together. The women relied on the highly skilled Chinese doctors and pharmacists; the noodle parlors served nutritious yet inexpensive meals; and Chinese shopkeepers depended upon the women’s business. At Virginia City, excavations around the Green Front Boarding House—a former brothel next door to the Chinese settlement—revealed Chinese ceramics and opium-related artifacts, confirming the relationship between the two groups. The lid of an opium can, repurposed into a small receptacle called a funs tray, served as a vehicle to measure the drug.
Mining

Shoveling buckets of rock and gravel, then hoisting them into the sluice, or cradle, was back-breaking work and most effective when several miners worked together. Chinese usually traveled, lived, and worked in family, clan, or village groups. This was ideal for small-scale placer claims. Chinese miners often purchased claims that Euro-Americans had either finished working or found too expensive to work. They then made their claims profitable by hard labor and cooperative effort. While some miners saw these successes as competition, Chinese miners actually complemented the work of others. By making unattractive claims produce, they contributed to the development of Montana’s mineral resources, making profits for themselves and for the territory.

**Mining hat**

Whether mining or building railroads, Chinese workers frequently wore woven bamboo hats like this one, dated circa 1890.

A miner moves equipment at placer mining workings on German Bar in the Ruby Valley.

**Yoke**

Yokes like this one were used for heavy work such as carrying water to rockers at mining operations.
Railroad

It was a harsh life for any railroad laborer, but especially for the fifteen thousand Chinese workers hired to help lay the tracks of the Northern Pacific Railroad. Supply trains following along the newly laid tracks included stores selling Chinese staples, mostly in the form of preserved goods. Archaeological evidence along the Thompson River indicates poor living conditions; camps assigned to the Chinese were segregated from non-Chinese worker camps and located in some of the most inaccessible, mosquito-infested areas. Opium paraphernalia is common at these camp sites, as smoking during leisure time helped ease the severe physical pains of hard labor.

Mattock

A mattock like this was used to chop through roots and gravel and to prepare the ground surface for the steel track and wooden ties. Chinese characters spell “Feng” and possibly identify the owner. The word “Feng” also means “abundant.”

Coins

Chinese coins were of little monetary value but held special meaning for Chinese sojourners. Minted in China for hundreds of years, they were often handed down to be used in rituals and as good luck charms. The circular coin with a square hole represents the merging of heaven (the spirit world) and earth (humanity) and symbolizes prosperity. In western Chinatowns, several coins might be strung on a cord and carried or placed in the cash register for good luck in business.

Creel

Newspaper accounts describe how Chinese fishermen lined the shores of the Clark Fork River as the tracks of the Northern Pacific Railroad were being laid in that area. A creel like this, covered in pitch to make it watertight, would have kept dinner fresh.
Laundry

For unskilled Chinese immigrants who spoke little or no English and could not find work, a laundry was a logical business choice. It required no training, limited equipment, and little capital. Laundries provided a much-needed service, especially in mining camps dominated by single men. Washing clothes was a difficult, time-consuming chore that required carrying and boiling water, scrubbing, soaking clothes in harsh soap, repeatedly rinsing, and, finally, dying. Laundry, however, was one of few types of employment open to women, which prompted the Montana legislature to pass a special tax on laundries in 1872 that targeted Chinese businesses by exempting women from the tax. Mining camps and most urban areas in Montana had Chinese laundries.

Sad iron

City officials found reasons to harass Chinese laundry proprietors. Drainage of dirty wash water flushed into the streets was one reason. Another was the fire hazard caused by keeping laundry stoves constantly blazing to heat multiple irons like this one.

Sprinkler

Spritzing water during ironing was commonly done by mouth. Euro-American customers sometimes viewed this practice with disgust and refused to patronize Chinese laundries. Sprinklers like the one shown at right were expensive and hardly solved the problem as they included a mouthpiece. Blowing into the mouthpiece created a fine mist. A little later, sprinkling was done by shaking this type of device, eliminating unsanitary practices.

This undated photograph shows the Sing Lee Laundry, located behind the St. Paul Saloon in Elliston.
Restaurant

Noodle parlor proprietors served both Asian and Euro-American patrons. The menu was hardly the traditional fare one would find in China, and adaptation was a necessity. What grew in China did not necessarily thrive in Montana. Daylily buds, *Hemerocallis fulva*, for example, a Chinese staple, were not indigenous to the West. Pollen of other types of lilies recovered from Chinese sites in Wyoming and Montana, and agave pollen in Arizona, indicate that cooks on the frontier made substitutions for the buds. Likewise, archaeological excavations of a Chinese restaurant at Big Timber revealed numerous shell fragments of a local turtle species, likely used in turtle soup, a Chinese delicacy.

Packaged noodle flour

Noodles are standard fare in Mandarin, or northern Chinese, cuisine. Montana’s Chinese, however, were almost exclusively from the southern Canton region where rice is the major staple. Rice was scarce on the western frontier, but grain could be grown and milled, so flour for making noodles was readily available. Noodles—and noodle parlors—became the norm in western Chinese restaurants.

Noodle knife

Making noodles by the bowlful was a major production requiring a huge table and giant rolling pins. The flattened dough was folded into layers and the layers cut evenly with a huge knife.
Noodle machine
Noodle machines like this one from the Mai Wah Noodle Parlor in Butte streamlined the noodle-making process. Dough was placed on the wooden ramp at one end. Turning the hand crank moved the dough through the rollers, flattening it, and propelled the sheets out the other end through the cutters. Modern electrified noodle machines still work on this principle.

Teapot
Because of Chinese exclusion acts, there were very few Chinese families in Montana. However, noodle parlors were sometimes family operations. There are still several multigenerational, family-run Chinese restaurants in Montana, and descendants have cherished heirlooms like this grandmother’s teapot.
Tall Tales

Lack of knowledge about the Chinese has fostered misunderstanding and fueled myths. Tales of Chinese tunnels, especially, persist in communities across the West. While remnant mining tunnels often run through neighborhoods and other areas, many miners dug tunnels, and none can be exclusively attributed to the Chinese. Likewise, steam heating tunnels beneath downtown areas are common in most western cities. Sometimes these tunnels were used for delivery purposes between businesses, but they were never exclusively used by the Chinese. Clandestine use of tunnels exclusively by the Chinese is fiction, not fact.

Pouch
A sojourner carried this embroidered bag from China to Montana. The contents were still intact when the bag was donated to the Montana Historical Society in 1968 and included a good luck coin, a comb, a fish can label, a flint pouch and flint for starting fires, and a letter from a brother.

Silver case
A dragon on one side and a snake on the other are appropriate decorations for this case that probably held matches.

Flint case
For a traveler, the ability to make fire was essential. A flint was kept inside this pouch. Striking it against the pouch’s iron bar produced sparks for fire-starting.
Letter
An August 9, 1893, letter from back home in China was among the contents of the embroidered pouch. A brother, Hao Hsing, writes to his sibling Ah Hei in Montana, advising him on his health and encouraging him to come back soon. “Don’t try to make too much money,” he urges, “just make enough to buy a ticket home so our mother won’t have to worry about you.”

Stone carving
The plum tree in this delicate stone carving symbolizes faithfulness. This piece includes a water receptacle for rinsing brushes and served as a paperweight on a scholar’s desk.
Apothecary

Mercantiles were an important focus of every Chinatown. The shelves were packed with both domestic and imported goods that came directly from China or from Chinatown in San Francisco. Items ranged from noisemakers, masks, and fireworks for holiday celebrations to such practical goods as toothbrushes, umbrellas, school supplies, and paintbrushes for calligraphy. Chinese mercantiles, pharmacies, and physicians’ offices were often found together.

Ginger jar

Historic photographs reveal that ceramic jars, many similar to this ginger jar, were sold by Chinese merchants.

Chinese medicines

Chinese pharmacists and physicians were highly skilled and well trained under masters in China. A Chinese apothecary shop would include plant, animal, and mineral elements from which the pharmacist would mix prescriptions. Flying squirrel feces (shown in bowl) and other exotic ingredients imported from China, along with western patent medicines, would be included in the apothecary’s inventory.
Opium pipe

Not all Chinese used opium, although it was an accepted form of relaxation. Artifacts from Chinese sites almost always include some sort of opium-related paraphernalia. Smoking was usually done in communal rooms set aside in temples, gambling houses, or businesses. It was a common activity not only among Chinese, but also among Euro-Americans and other ethnic groups. Chinese managed the communal opium-smoking rooms and generally handled this activity responsibly, probably more so than miners who drank whiskey in saloons.

Scale

The delicate natural wood violin-shaped case holds a scale for weighing opium, herbs, or fine gold dust.
Temple

Chinese brought Taoist, Buddhist, Confucian, and Christian religious beliefs to Montana. In the absence of family homes where altars would be erected, temples were usually found in urban Chinatowns. Temples not only provided a place to worship and socialize, but also offered sanctuary from racism, a network of support, and moral guidance. They were commonly called “joss houses” for the joss sticks, or incense, that was burned inside and outside. “Joss” is a Chinese Pidgin English corruption of “deus,” the Latin word for god.

The Chinese temple in Virginia City, Montana, featured an altar constructed in characteristic layers. Elements commonly found in Chinese temples include lanterns, tapestries, peacock feathers (above the altar), candles and artificial altar flowers, incense burners, and joss sticks (center).

Palace lanterns
One of a pair, this palace lantern once hung in the Mai Wah Noodle Parlor in Butte. The frame is of wood with inset hand-painted panels.

Temple sign
In communities in the United States, Canada, and elsewhere overseas, Chinese temples were sometimes called “Chinese Masonic temples.” There was actually no association with Freemasonry, but there were similarities such as fraternal membership, importance of the number three, and elaborate funeral rituals. These helped explain to outsiders the powerful secret structure that influenced its members. This sign hung over the entry to Helena’s temple on West Main Street. Community temples were usually dedicated to ancient military heroes and Helena’s was no exception. The translation reads: “We rely heavily on your generous favor.”
Chinese altar

Chinese altars were richly appointed with embroidered tapestries, lamps, and carvings. The carvings on this altar, from Helena’s Chinese temple, depict birds, flowers, silkworm moths, and bats—in pairs for good luck—on the upper portion. The center characters pay homage to Guan Yu, a military hero, while the characters along the sides form poetry in his honor:

“Throughout the ages, his Firmness and Loyalty Shine bright as the Moon and Sun
For eons, his Bravery and Sincerity with the hills and rivers is one”
Chronology of the Chinese in Montana, 1862–1943

1862  Gold is discovered at Grasshopper Creek in present-day Beaverhead County.

1870  Chinese miners, mostly from Guangdong (Canton) Province, comprise 10 percent of Montana’s overall population. Helena’s population is 20 percent Chinese.

1868  The Burlingame Treaty between China and the United States paves the way for later exclusion acts by prohibiting Chinese in the United States and Americans in China from becoming naturalized citizens.

1872  Montana’s territorial legislature passes a special tax on Chinese laundries and an act prohibiting “aliens” (that is, Chinese) from owning placer mines or mining claims. The Territorial Supreme Court two years later declares this law unconstitutional.

1881  Henry Villard takes the helm of the Northern Pacific Railroad, which employs fifteen thousand Chinese workers to lay the tracks across Montana and the Northwest.

1882  The federal Chinese Exclusion Act passes, prohibiting laborers and unskilled workers from entering the United States and denying citizenship to all Chinese except those native born.

1890  Chinese population peaks in Montana at 2,532, with the largest numbers in Lewis and Clark (602), Silver Bow (584), and Missoula (405) Counties.

1892  Federal government extends the Chinese Exclusion Act as the Geary Act, which requires Chinese to obtain a certificate of residence or face deportation.

1896  The Butte union boycott against the Chinese begins.

1897  Hum Fay and other Chinese businessmen initiate a lawsuit challenging the boycott. However, as many as 350 Chinese businessmen leave Butte.

1900  Judge Hiram Knowles rules on Hum Fay’s lawsuit in favor of the defendants. It ends the boycott, but the defendants collect no damages.

1902  Federal government makes the Geary Act permanent.

1909  Montana passes the Anti-Miscegenation Act prohibiting interracial marriage (including between whites and Chinese). It was not repealed until 1953.

1930  Montana’s Chinese population dwindles to 491, including 17 married couples. Ninety percent of Montana’s male Chinese are married men whose spouses live in China.

1943  Congress repeals all exclusion acts, limits the number of Chinese immigrants to 105 per annum, and allows foreign-born Chinese to apply for naturalization.

Artifact credits

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