

A City within a City: Truckee's Chinatown

By Corri Jimenez

The Chinese labor workers on Donner Summit were the literal muscle that constructed the Central Pacific Railroad (CPRR) and played an intrinsic role in propelling Truckee into becoming a lumber magnate from 1868 to 1878. However, Truckee's Chinatown and its people are an untold story deciphered in archival history. Due to the extent of anti-Chinese resentment, let's reflect for a moment on the people and their Chinatown.

Truckee's first Chinatown was located on the corner of Spring Street and Jibboom Street, behind Front Street in a triangular area. The *Truckee Weekly Tribune* recorded on September 9, 1868 that Truckee contained "25 saloons, ten dry goods and clothing store, five grocery stores, seven lodging houses and sixteen 'china shops.'" Beside the local newspapers, the *New York Tribune* in 1869 raved about it:

...A city of John Chinamen, with an appearance of Irish Shanties, the inevitable saloons, a very comfortable Railroad hotel, and certain thriving marks of infinite variety.... There are long streets of Chinese laundries, barbers stores, tea stores, peanut stands, and nondescript booths, all alike as two peas in a pod, and adorned with big signs, persuasive no doubt, to the Celestial mind, and impenetrable to us.

A Full Assortment of
China Goods,
Kept Constantly on Hand.

BOOTS AND SHOES,
GLOVES AND SOCKS,
OX YOKES, BOWS, AND GOADS,
PLAYING CARDS, AND GLOCKS.

WE ARE ALSO PREPARED TO STORE and FORWARD MERCHANDISE AND
MACHINERY consigned to our care, on the Most Reasonable Terms.

WE ALSO DEAL IN WOOD AND CHARCOAL
And FILL ORDERS PROMPTLY,

CHINESE LABOR

Furnished at Short Notice, when Orders are Properly
Guaranteed.

GOODS DELIVERED WITHIN REASONABLE DISTANCES FREE
OF CHARGE—Except Hay and Grain.

ORDERS from Merchants and Dealers respectfully solicited.
The Highest Market Price Paid for Country Produce.

SISSON, WALLACE & CO.
Truckee, March 29th, 1877

In 1870, the federal population census paints Chinatown as 407 individuals in a town of 1,467 people with 731 dwellings. The Chinese represented woodcutters, merchants, laundrymen, doctors, and prostitutes. In feeding the steam engines on the railroad and hearths in Truckee, woodcutters were crucial and made up over 170 laborers who were paid \$1.50/cord, the equivalent of \$20.00 today. Merchants and grocers owned 96% of the land in Chinatown and there were eleven grocery stores in town, such as Fong Lee's store, and a gambling hall that was worth \$8,000. Laundries were embedded in non-Chinese neighborhoods serving the greater community. Wau Lee's laundry, south of the railroad tracks, offered a bathing house that was enjoyed by many locals in town. Four doctors practiced in Chinatown and were considered successful in treating venereal diseases. As the only female companionship in the male-dominated town, 22 prostitutes worked in eight houses, adjacent to non-Chinese prostitutes.

Caption: Sisson, Wallace & Co. advertisement, *Truckee*

Republican March 5, 1878. Located in *Fire & Ice* (Truckee Donner Historical Society, 19).

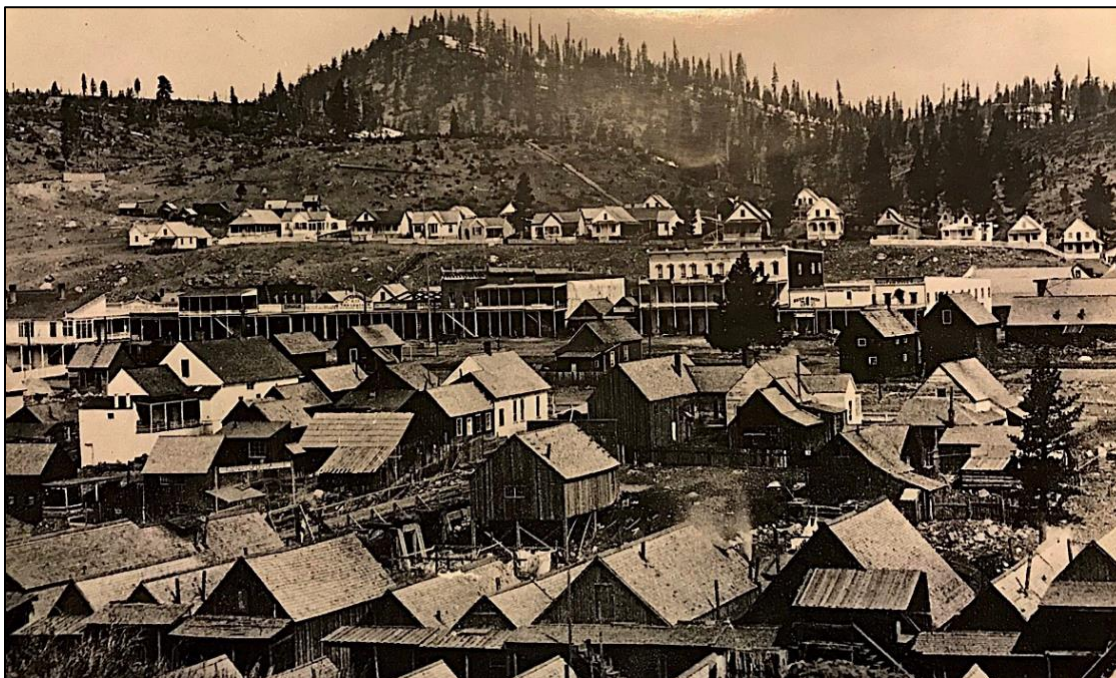
From 1870 until 1875, Truckee prospered from the benefits of the CPRR which was heavily exporting lumber and cords of wood to Virginia City's silver mines via the Virginia & Truckee Railroad. On May 29, 1875, Chinatown burned down. It is estimated that Chinese establishments lost \$50,000 from

this devastating fire. Four days later, the *Truckee Republican* reported on “The New Chinatown” and an effort to protect Truckee’s citizens. The newspaper reported:

The plan is to have no more Chinese houses built on Second Street, below this street, and to have none built on the south side of the street at all...They (the Chinese) will be allowed to extend their town back on the hill as far as they will find it necessary and the land given to them at reasonable rates...The question seems to be amicably settled at present, and, however desirable it may be to have them removed, taking all things into consideration, we believe the citizens will have reason to be satisfied providing these terms are carried out.

Even though fire devastated Truckee’s Chinatown in 1875, the Chinese were a resilient community. When Virginia City’s silver production declined hostility aimed towards the Chinese grew due to economical uncertainty. Like any recession, it is best articulated in funds, which peaked in 1877 (\$36 million) and drastically fell in 1878 (\$19 million) when 50% of the sawmills shutdown, leading to significant layoffs of skilled mill labor and mounting resentment of the Chinese. This view was reflected in the *Truckee Republican* on July 10, 1875 that commented Chinatown had “a very good appearance” but by 1877, said, “Stores, gambling dens, tailor shops, bootmaking establishments, cigar and tobacco, opium and prostitution houses—each were visited and each were found as uncleanly and filthy as the preceding. We cannot foresee wherein our country is to be benefitted by their citizenship.” In 1878, the Chinatown caught on fire three times and it was projected to be by the work of anti-Chinese vigilantes, known as the “Caucasian League.”

In taking control of the situation, the Safety Committee bought the lots owned by the Chinese on Jibboom, and paid to relocate them outside the town’s limits, across the Truckee River to South East River Street on land purchased by Charles Crocker. Of the 1,195 residents in town during the 1880 federal census, 303 were Chinese and half were working as woodcutters.

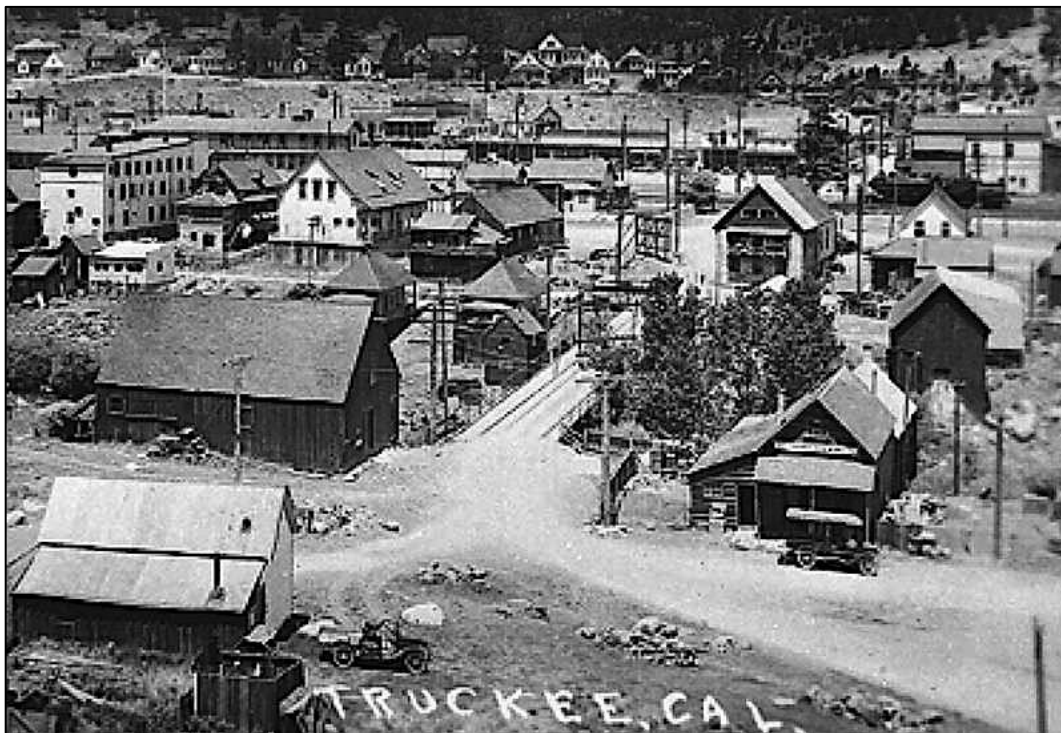


Caption: 1878 Truckee, looking northwest at Commercial Row. Note the bridge in the center, and the Chinatown at the bottom with the rear flat awnings between buildings (Located in the Truckee Donner Historical Society).

Between 1878 and 1881, the Virginia City silver mines spiraled into a decline, and by 1881, Truckee's mills were closing drastically. With unemployment of Truckee's workforce high, antagonism intensified on good Chinese residents. On November 25, 1882, the *Truckee Republican* printed "The Cue Klux Klan:"

To the people of California, and especially to anti-Chinese leagues, we suggest the bloodless remedy of cue (sic) cutting as an escape from serious complications, and a sure cure for the Chinese pestilence...

The anti-Chinese Caucasian League heavily targeted employers of the Chinese, such as the town's biggest woodchopper employer, Sisson, Wallace & Co. The town's anti-Chinese views had escalated and included prominent businessmen, championed by Charles McGlashan, in boycotting the Chinese and riding all the Chinese from town by summer of 1886.



Caption: Chinese Herb Shop, c.1920, when it was the Truckee Bottling Works (Located in the Truckee Donner Historical Society).

Today, the only building from Truckee's Chinatown that exists is the Chinese Herb Shop located at 10004 South East River Street. The little shop, built in 1878, is a brick, fireproof building with iron metal shutters that has survived many fires. From the 1920s up until 1960s, it was used as the Truckee Bottling Works by the Englehart family and was rumored to have the finest bootlegged whiskey in town.

Sidebar:

- For more information and a list of summer activities going on in Truckee to celebrate the sesquicentennial of the Transcontinental Railroad go to <https://goldspike.org> or the Facebook page: Donner Summit-Truckee Golden Spike Celebration.

About the author:

Corri Jimenez is an architectural historian and historic preservation professional working in the Tahoe area. For more information, Michael Andrew Goldstein's M.A. thesis "Truckee's Chinese Community: From Coexistence to Disintegration, 1870-1890" (Asian American Arts, University of California Los Angeles, 1988).