

A Place to Hide

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According to Joel Parker Whitney biographer Richard Miller, Chinese laborers built “miles and miles” of 5-6 foot high stone walls on the Whitney Ranch between 1875 and 1880. Almost all of the walls have yielded to bulldozers during Rocklin’s expansion of the past 50 years. Some of the remaining walls, like the one here, show vandalism

The Central Pacific Railroad completed major construction on the eastbound leg of the transcontinental railroad in 1869 and U.S. Census records show that by 1879 twenty-one of the railroad’s 14,000 Chinese construction workers had settled in Rocklin.

By 1876 Rocklin’s Chinatown consisted of twenty-five housing units located northwest of Rocklin’s railroad roundhouse at the corner of Granite Street, now Rocklin road, and Front Street.

Some Chinese grew for-sale vegetables in the area southeast of town known, then and now, as “China Garden”. Some worked at the roundhouse and some worked as domestics in the homes of Rocklin’s Euro-Americans.

According to the California Historical Society, Chinese immigration to California had accelerated in the early 1850s as the Gold Rush attracted Chinese people escaping political corruption and economic decline, mainly in southern China.

But for almost 100 years, and especially in the late 19th century, Chinese immigrants faced government sanctioned isolation and harassment. An 1850 foreign Miners' Tax discouraged the Chinese from gold mine ownership and in 1854 the California State Supreme Court denied the Chinese certain rights, including the right to testify against Euro-Americans in court.

During the 1870s, a post Civil War downturn in the national economy resulted in serious unemployment problems. Rocklin’s granite industry felt the effects gradually until all but one of Rocklin’s quarries had shut down by early 1880. Jobs for Rocklin’s Euro-Americans were scarce and across the state the willingness of the Chinese to work hard for low wages ignited the ire of Euro-American workers and by 1876 South Placer County was a flashpoint for retribution against Chinese residents.

The upheaval came suddenly in Rocklin on September 15, 1876. The Placer County sheriff investigated a homicide near Loomis and accused a Chinese cook, named Ah Sam, of murdering three Euro-Americans as he tried to recover \$120.00 that he had paid for a mining claim. The accusation was enough to incite Rocklin’s citizens to action. On the following Monday morning they met and voted to notify all Chinese to leave town by 6:00 that evening. By 4:00 every Chinese resident had left, even the Chinese roundhouse employees. Shortly after 6:00 several Rocklin men marched into the deserted Chinatown and destroyed all 25 dwellings. Citizens in Roseville, Loomis and Penryn also evicted their Chinese residents. About 100

armed men from Rocklin and about 20 from Roseville scoured the countryside, driving out the occupants of various Chinese encampments .

Ah Sam killed himself as pursuers closed in.

The events of 1876 severely disrupted Chinese culture in South Placer County. The July 26, 1879 issue of the Placer Herald reported that “six widows in Rocklin support themselves and their children by doing washing for townspeople, formerly done by Chinese. No Chinaman can rent a house .or obtain employment in Rocklin.” Other Rocklin newspaper stories of the time recounted the Chinese expulsions in gleeful detail that doesn’t deserve reprinting.

Rocklin’s census records for 1880 through 1910 show not one Chinese resident in Rocklin or at the Whitney Ranch.

But there is evidence that, in spite of Rocklin laborers’ antipathy toward the Chinese, local businessmen schemed to hide Chinese workers from census takers and continued to exploit Chinese willingness to work hard at menial jobs for low wages. Joel Parker Whitney biographer Richard Miller claimed that, in spite of census evidence to the contrary, 1,000 Chinese worked at the Whitney Ranch, building water courses and stone fences at least through 1880. Correspondence in Whitney Ranch records dated October 1887 shows that five Chinese domestics arrived at the ranch by train via the animal loading gate on the western side of the ranch, far from Rocklin’s passenger terminal and the angry Rocklin citizens who had evicted Rocklin’s Chinese residents eleven years earlier. Whitney’s diary of 1899 describes his assignment of seven Chinese men to work in the vineyards of his neighbor, Otis Brown. And Whitney family tradition is that nineteenth century Chinese domestics are interred in the grounds near the Whitney family’s mausoleum on the Whitney Oaks Golf Course.

In 1879 the California Legislature attempted to allow municipalities to remove their Chinese residents to outlying areas, thus giving legal sanction to Rocklin’s expulsions of 1876. The California Supreme Court voided the law in 1880.

But the Federal Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 severely limited Chinese immigration and access to citizenship. Congress repealed the act in 1943 to cement the U.S. alliance with China against the Japanese in World War II