

For Immediate Release (December 15, 2014)

Beehive Archive

Welcome to the Beehive Archive—your weekly bite-sized look at some of the most pivotal—and peculiar—events in Utah history. With all of the history and none of the dust, the Beehive Archive is a fun way to catch up on Utah’s past. Beehive Archive is a production of the Utah Humanities Council, provided to local papers as a weekly feature article focusing on Utah history topics drawn from our award-winning radio series, which can be heard each week on [KCPW](#) and [Utah Public Radio](#).

Working on the Railroad: Utah’s Chinese Pioneers

Chinese immigrant laborers built the railroad from California to Utah.

On May 10, 1869 the Union Pacific and Central Pacific Railroads joined at Utah’s Promontory Point, completing the first transcontinental railroad system in the United States. Without the efforts of over 12,000 Chinese immigrant laborers, it is highly doubtful that the Central Pacific Railroad would have been successful in laying its part of the track between California and northern Utah.

Most of the Chinese workers on the railroad came from southern China’s Guangdong Province, a region wracked in the 1800s by natural disasters, social upheaval, and economic scarcity. In the face of these problems, many Chinese looked to emigration as a way to improve their circumstances, and the discovery of gold in California seemed to highlight the boundless opportunities in America. Traveling through Hong Kong to San Francisco – a journey that averaged two months – Chinese immigrants flooded into the American West. The first wave came as indentured servants, while those who came later were advanced the \$40 passage by Hong Kong brokerage firms that collected the voyage debt from a worker’s eventual earnings.

At first, the managers of the Central Pacific Railroad were wary of Chinese workers, but after hiring an initial 50 men and realizing how industrious and precise they were, the company opened the door to more workers from China. Blasting and chipping their way over the Sierra Nevada, the Chinese laborers eventually cleared mountains and sped toward Promontory where the famous Golden Spike was finally driven.

Those first railroad workers spawned a variety of Chinese neighborhoods in communities across Utah, especially in cities and towns where mining and the railroad were important parts of the economy. Corinne had a thriving Chinese community, as did Ogden, Salt Lake, Park City, and the mining towns of Carbon County.

Racial prejudice and restrictive immigration laws – such as the *Chinese Exclusion Act* of 1882 – specifically targeted Chinese people and took a toll on these communities. Nonetheless, people of Chinese ancestry remain an important part of Utah’s social and cultural landscape.

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