

Sam Harrington

Chinese Rail Workers Home Life

When reading researching about the Chinese rail workers, I was drawn into their day-to-day life. The problem with researching about the life of the workers, is that many of the workers were undocumented and with that their day-to-day life went unrecorded. This presents many difficulties with reaching, much of the research is therefore speculations off the known poor pay and poor working conditions.

In addition to the poor records the event of creating the transcontinental railroad took place nearly 150 years ago which presents even more trouble because many of the artifacts and stories are lost or worn away. This event that does not appear to be too far away is treated as an archaeology event similar too findings of ancient Greece. The article, “In the dunes of a Utah ghost town, archeologists recover the remnants of a home once occupied by Chinese rail workers - and help unlock a neglected history” made claim about the findings of the referenced house as a “big deal.” The article continues to explain the recent findings of a Chinese rail worker home.

The home is small, compared to the standards of the 1800s, and tiny compared to the standards of today. The hut had a floor space of “about seven feet by about 12 feet.” Which to put in perspective, it is about the size of a small bedroom or a lavish walk-in closet. This is the size of a house, with a kitchen and bunkbeds meant to house “two to four” workers. This helps show the effect of the low wages that the workers were paid. These huts were not stand alone though; they were a part of a larger system holding communities tightly knit helping spread the money further.

In the area it was said “at least 20, 30 additional homes” were in this community. If taking the larger of the numbers presented that hints at about 120 workers were a part of this neighborhood. To fuel this community a Chinese business was sprung on the white, segregated Main Street. This is because the community is on the outskirts of town, the opposite side of the China Town in Terrance.

It is worthy to note that even with the lack of pay the archeological site found remnants of “peanut shells ... coconut shell ... melon seeds from Chinese melon, sort of a cantaloupe. And even Chinese pitted dates. In nearby units, ... cuttlefish, the little squid.” These items must have been imported from China and are very traditional meals that these workers would have eaten from back home. So even with the extreme lack of pay, the workers still focused on keeping their traditions, their roots, even sacrificing comfort (a small home) to cook with traditional ingredients.

This hut is said to have stood for about 30 years, and to have been lived in by a handful of different workers. Which is still just a fraction of the thousands of workers that helped build the rail. This article and the scope of the archeological findings help humanize the numbers of the situation and show that even with the poor wages the workers still valued tradition. They were not machines but people who found comfort in home and community like any other individual.

Sources

“In the Dunes of a Utah Ghost Town, Archeologists Recover the Remnants of a Home Once Occupied by Chinese Rail Workers - and Help Unlock a Neglected History.” *As It Happens*, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2021.