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The Chinese in Oregon, c. 1870-1880

THIS basic demographic analysis of the Chinese community in Oregon between approximately 1870 and 1880 is, to the writers' knowledge, original spadework in the field of the Chinese experience in America.* Voluminous works exist on the Chinese in California, the area of their greatest impact in numbers and influence, but California was not the only place where Chinese penetrated American culture. There have been works on the Chinese in New York and an interesting book on the Chinese living in the Mississippi River Valley. All of these studies are valuable in the light they shed on many issues such as the immigrant experience in Anglo-Saxon America, the experience of a racially, culturally and, in almost every other respect, different group of people—different to the point of being unintelligible to many of the Americans they encountered. Accordingly, this and other studies can serve as building blocks in understanding part of Anglo-Saxon culture by understanding its reaction to the Chinese.

The early Chinese immigrants to Oregon were actually an overflow from California into Oregon's southern counties; they were miners who came with the discovery of placer mines and they followed mining into other parts of the state. Verne Bright, in his description of Auburn, an eastern Oregon gold town of the 1860s, describes the Chinese miners who "patiently panned the gulches until there was scarcely an ounce of gold in the tailings of other days. . . . When the Chinese miners had gleaned the last meager cleanup of dust from the gulches, the story of Auburn was ended."¹

*OHQ plans the 1977 publication of a longer study of the Chinese in Oregon, with background material (and not demographic analysis), from Chia-lin Chen's "A Gold Dream in the Blue Mountains."

1. Verne Bright, "Blue Mountain Eldorados: Auburn, 1861," *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, LXII (September, 1961), 236.

Following the pattern in California and other states, the Chinese came to Oregon also to work on railroads. Reverend Loomis wrote: "The road in process of construction from Portland, Oregon, towards the South, is employing this kind of labor and cannot obtain as much as it needs."² By 1870, the Chinese in Oregon had penetrated many occupations (mines, railroad projects and textile mills) and were accomplishing what they had come to do—earn a living.³ David Newsom commented in 1876 on their many useful occupations and the reasons:

But now by rail and by quick passage by steamships, we must compete for all we sell with foreign people. We cannot longer give the prices asked here for common labor. The necessity of hiring Chinamen at low rates—just what they ask—is forced upon us. And these Chinese will work at every sort of labor we wish them to perform. And they will *stick to their jobs!* I have never yet seen a Chinaman *drunk*, and I can not say that of our white folks.

There are hundreds of thousands of acres of the very best arable lands in Western Oregon that remain *untilled*. Why is it so? The reason is, that those lands are more or less set in brush. At the rates charged heretofore by our men for grubbing out and preparing those lands for the plow, the owners could not afford it. . . . And wood-chopping, rail-splitting, ditching, wood-sawing, washing, cooking, and a dozen other sorts of work, must be hired done. And . . . the most important point to us on this coast is, the great lack of female "helps" in the *kitchens*. As soon as our men can afford it, they take times easily. But not so with our women. . . . The damp winters and the hardships which our women endure, are telling upon their health and lives. I have enquired of scores of ladies in Oregon as to how well their China servants perform in the cook-rooms and kitchens, and not one ever finds fault with those servants. And nearly all the cooking and drudgery in the hotels and boarding houses are done here by Chinese. Chinamen are scattering out all over Western Oregon grubbing and clearing up the bush lands ready for the plow, at one-half the rates charged by the whites—Chinese board themselves in all cases.⁴

While the Chinese were an important economic component in the community, initially in mining towns, they were very

2. Rev. A.W. Loomis, "How Our Chinamen Are Employed," *Overland Monthly*, March 1869, 232-33.

3. Alfred S. Lomax, "Oregon City Woolen Mill," *OHQ*, XXXII (September, 1931), 256; see also Malcolm Clark, jr., "The Bigot Disclosed; 90 Years of Nativism," *OHQ*, LXXV (June, 1974), 123-31.

4. *David Newsom: The Western Observer, 1805-1882* (Portland, 1972), 205.

low in the social stratum. The community viewed them as good only for working already washed out claims. In the face of discriminatory taxes, some Chinese even became prosperous and could buy claims with cash. With patience and hard work, some still succeeded in making a living from these claims. This penchant for hard work increased their acceptability by white employers for other jobs.⁵

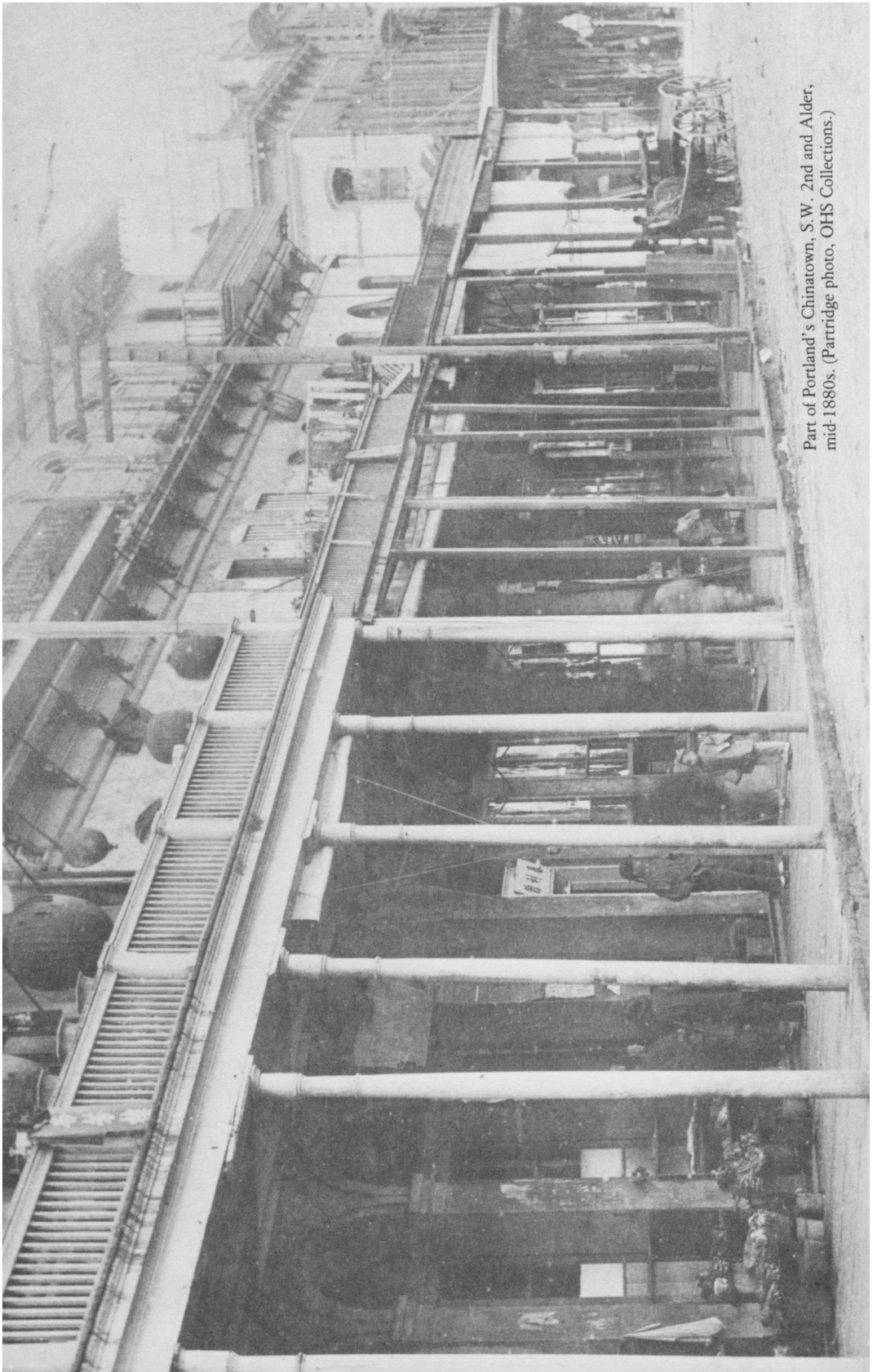
The record concerning the Chinese in Oregon between 1869 and 1882 and how they lived is sparse, even though these people were the subject of local and national political agitation and even Constitutional disputes. In 1870, the census takers enumerated 3,330 Chinese in Oregon. In 1880, they numbered 9,510.⁶ In 1870, the majority of the Chinese were located in Grant, Jackson, and Josephine counties. Josephine and Jackson counties are located on the California border and they contained approximately 18% of the Chinese in Oregon. Grant County is located in northeast Oregon and it was the home of around 28% of the Chinese. The three counties with which this study principally deals—Clatsop, Multnomah, and Wasco—had a total of 536 Chinese or 16% of the total. The six already-named counties held 72% of the Chinese community. Of these counties, Multnomah was the only one with a sizable city in it, Portland. In fact, 496 Chinese lived in Portland in 1870.

The counties of Wasco, Clatsop and Multnomah combined only accounted for 16% of Oregon's Chinese in 1870; by 1880, they claimed 57% of Oregon's Chinese inhabitants. Another point of interest was the substantial increase in the size of these counties' separate Chinese communities. Clatsop had only 13 Chinese in 1870; in 1880, this number had increased to 2,317. Similarly, Wasco County had only 27 Chinese in 1870, but again their increase, though less spectacular than Clatsop, was to 1,159 Chinese in 1880. Multnomah lagged behind the other two in rate of increase with its Chinese inhabitants only increasing from 496 to 1,961.

The counties themselves exhibit divergent characteristics. Clatsop borders on both the Columbia River and the Pacific

5. George W. Fuller, *A History of the Pacific Northwest* (New York, 1931), 281.

6. U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Ninth Census of the United States, 1870: The Vital Statistics of the U.S.*, Vol. I, p. 13 (hereinafter referred to as *Ninth Census*); and *Tenth Census*, I: 2-3.



Part of Portland's Chinatown, S.W. 2nd and Alder,
mid-1880s. (Partridge photo, OHS Collections.)

Ocean. It includes Astoria, but few other urban centers. On the other hand, Multnomah, smaller in territory than the other two and also bordering on the Columbia River, contains Oregon's major city, Portland. Wasco was chosen as a typical rural county.

There is a limit to how far information from the manuscript census can be extended. One finds in both 1870 and 1880 not only untraceable variant spellings of Chinese names, but even large blocks, sometimes as many as 100, of Chinese who were named "A. Chinaman" by the census taker. Besides rendering any tracing and match-up process impossible, this fact also is some indication of the virtual facelessness of Oregon's Chinese and of American attitudes.

Beginning in 1870 with the sex of these Chinese (remembering that Multnomah County accounts for all but 40 of the Chinese coded), it is not surprising to find 92.3%, or 495, were males. There were only 41 females in Wasco, Clatsop and Multnomah counties. The average age of all the Chinese was 26.3, with the age group 20 to 30 accounting for 51.6% of the population. In raw numbers, this would mean that 277 of the total 536 Chinese fell into the 20 to 30-year-old age bracket. If the 68 whose age fell into the 30 to 35 age bracket are included, then the group between 20 and 35 would include 345 of the Chinese, or 64.3%. From this, one can easily see that the Chinese in the three counties were predominately mature males, though at 26 possibly not quite as young as other immigrant groups.

The community in 1870 was engaged in 30 different occupations ranging from hair picker and prostitute to gardener and carpenter. However, four particular occupations employed the majority of these people. They were common laborers (154 persons), laundry workers (121), domestics (91), and cooks and dishwashers (53). This represents 78% of the working population. Twenty-eight percent of these Chinese males working as common laborers is not particularly unusual, although, if compared with other immigrant groups, particularly the Irish, one might expect this percentage to be a bit higher. On the other hand, finding 49.5% engaged in basically service occupations—laundry, domestic work, and cooking/dishwashing—would indi-

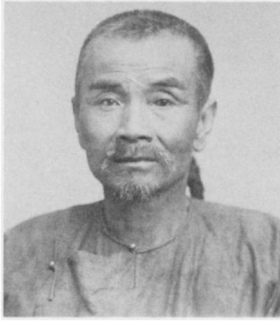
cate that these Chinese males were accepting what was commonly thought of as “women’s work” and therefore were not competing intensely with white males for work. Another noteworthy statistic concerning occupation status in 1870 was that only 5.9% of the Chinese in Wasco, Clatsop and Multnomah counties held jobs which could be grouped in the category of mining, mechanical industries, and manufacturing.

How do these county figures compare with occupational statistics both nationally and statewide? On a national level, 30.8% of America’s 63,199 Chinese inhabitants in 1870 were employed in professional and personal services. This group, in addition to including laundrymen and cooks, also includes common laborers, who alone constituted 14% of America’s working Chinese. Even with the laborers included, the national percentage of 30.8 is considerably lower than the three Oregon counties. Conversely, the proportion of the total Chinese population across the country engaged in mining and manufacturing was 27%, as compared with the three counties’ 5.9%. These comparisons point to the fact that in the 1870 sample, Multnomah County and its urban environs of Portland were disproportionately represented in the percentages for the selected counties. This fact is further borne out by comparison of statewide occupational dispersement. For the state of Oregon the percentage of Chinese employed in professional and personal services (again including laborers) was 18.5, some 30 percentage points lower than that found in the sample counties. Yet of Oregon’s Chinese as a whole, 75% of them were working in the combined fields of mining and manufacturing—almost 70 percentage points above the number of Chinese persons found in the same occupation in Wasco, Clatsop, and Multnomah counties.⁷

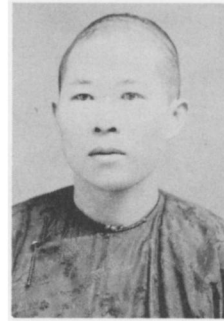
Accordingly, one can derive the conclusion that not only were the urban occupations of the Chinese in Portland decidedly different from the predominating rural occupations with regard to both national and statewide figures, but that Oregon’s Chinese population was not totally urbanized in 1870.

The record again is sparse on the wages earned by Chinese. The April 19, 1870, edition of the *Morning Oregonian* men-

7. *Ninth Census*, III: 364-72.



Left, unknown.
Young man (right)
was servant in
Trevett home,
Portland. ("Ling
Kee, photographer,"
OHS Cols.)



tioned that the rate paid to Chinese servants was \$30 a month. In the mid-1870s, when the canning industry began to expand in both Clatsop and Multnomah counties, the Portland newspaper commented: "The new canning establishment of A. Booth & Co. . . . employs a force of 180 men, mostly Chinamen, at average wages of about one dollar per day."⁸ Finally, on September 8, 1877, the *Morning Oregonian* (p. 1) reported that the "land owners in Washington County pay Chinamen \$20 an acre to clear land." This is indeed a meager record upon which to base generalizations about the annual income of Oregon's Chinese.

One of the most common arguments against permitting Chinese to immigrate to the United States was that they were unassimilable into America's western culture. The degree to which the Chinese attended school would at least indicate how strong an effort was being made on both sides to acculturate Oregon's Orientals. In 1870, within the three select counties, there was not a single Chinese, male or female, attending school. Furthermore, in the whole state, there were no Chinese females and only seven Chinese males recorded as having attended school between January 1869 and January 1870.⁹ This would indicate that there were factors discouraging Chinese school attendance. Racial bigotry on the part of white communities perhaps explains this low attendance in part. Conversely, since most of these Chinese males were in their twenties, it must have been embarrassing for them to begin their American schooling in the lower grades with children much younger than they. No doubt there were other reasons for the limitation of Chinese school attendance such as group solidarity binding them to their peer group and traditional Chinese values and social structure. Moreover, since most of these Chinese worked

8. Editorial, *Morning Oregonian*, May 17, 1875, p. 2.

9. *Ninth Census*, I: 53.

there was little time for school. What schooling was acquired by these men was probably obtained at some church Sunday School. They probably, as in the case of Chinese communities throughout the country, attended these Sunday School classes only to develop a basic familiarity with the English language. This is substantiated by the fact that the churches attended by the Chinese for reasons of learning English experienced no large numbers of Chinese converts.¹⁰

The last statistic concerning the nature of the Chinese community in Clatsop, Multnomah and Wasco counties can be dealt with straightforwardly. Of the 536 Chinese surveyed in 1870, 127 (or 23.6%) lived in households with white people. Since 48 of these Chinese could not be categorized as living with or not living with other whites, that means that 361, or 67.3%, of them lived exclusively among other Chinese. This is probably not unusual among immigrant groups, but it did lend credence to the anti-Chinese propaganda that these “celestials” were clannish and huddled together.

Such was the character of the Chinese immigrant community in 1870 within the three northern counties of Oregon, Clatsop, Multnomah, and Wasco. The majority were males, in the mid-twenties, engaged predominately in service occupations, living together in boarding houses in certain specific locations. They were probably not radically different from other immigrant enclaves of other nationalities in other cities throughout the country. What did make them undesirable and a threat to American institutions in the eyes of those supporting exclusion was a combination of the potentiality for growth in their numbers through an increase in immigration and the fact that they were Chinese.

In 1880, the census takers again undertook their task of enumerating America's population. In the ten years since the last census, Oregon's Chinese population had almost tripled, increasing from 3,330 to 9,510.¹¹ In utilizing the 1880 manuscript census for the three counties, some of the same information as already presented from the 1870 census can be generated. Regrettably, secondary source material dealing with the

10. Betty Lee Sung, *The Story of the Chinese in America* (New York, 1967), 215-24 *passim*.

11. *Tenth Census*, I: 2-3.

income and economic status of the Orientals inhabiting Oregon does not exist. However, the 1880 census does offer statistics on marital status which were not on the 1870 census.

As already mentioned the sample counties experienced a remarkable increase in their Chinese denizens. From a combined total of 536, the number of Chinese grew to 5,458.¹² The writers decided to take a 20% sample, *i.e.*, coding every fifth Chinese as they appeared in the census book. Though this sample may have produced some distortion in the aggregate numbers of Chinese found in, say, one or another occupation or age group, in dealing with percentages it can be taken as a more than adequate indicator of the demographic characteristics of the Chinese for comparison to those surveyed in 1870. Hence, the sample yielded 458, 390, and 240 coded subjects from Clatsop, Multnomah and Wasco counties respectively, or a total sample of 1,088 Chinese.

A brief mention of the other three counties mentioned in the earlier part of this section will prepare the way for continuing with an analysis of the sample group. It was pointed out that Grant, Jackson, and Josephine counties were the homes of 946, 497, and 102 Chinese miners in 1870. In 1880, these counties were basically the same in character for they held 905, 337 and 291 Chinese respectively. As in 1870, the overwhelming majority of these were still employed in the mining industry.

In 1880 the average age of this expanded Chinese population was 27.9 with 26 being the singularly most common age. This does not differ appreciably from the average age of 26.3 and the most common one of 25 found in 1870. Again, as in 1870, the age group of 20 to 30 accounts for the majority of Chinese; in the case of 1880 it is 53.5%. Hence, the Chinese community of 1880, while having a few older people (1870 saw no Chinese being over 55, whereas 1880 saw six), was one of people in their twenties.

Occupational statistics for 1880 bear the mark of an expanded population for, while in 1870 there were only 30 different occupations, in 1880 there were a total of 43 different endeavors in which the Chinese were engaged. Since, like 1870, well over 90% of those Orientals coded were males (in the case

12. *Tenth Census*, I: 2-3.

of 1880, 98.3% of the sample were men), there was no alteration of the occupation statistics in favor of areas of female employment.

There were substantial changes in the nature of work by which the Chinese earned their living between 1870 and 1880. In 1870 there appeared no Chinese working in the canning (mostly of fish) industry but in 1880, 31.4% of the sample were so employed.¹³ Though the percentage of Chinese employed as common laborers remained about the same (28.7% in 1870 and 23.1% in 1880), there was a marked decline in the proportion of Chinese operating or working in laundries between the censuses. In 1870, 22.5% of working Chinese were involved in laundry work, including ironers; by 1880, this percentage had dropped to 6.6. Similarly, the proportion of laboring Chinese utilized as domestic servants dropped appreciably during the decade, from 16.9 to 2.5%. The percentage of Orientals employed as cooks also dropped from 1870 to 1880, from 9.3 to 5.1%.

On the other side of the ledger, there were occupations which took on greater representation within the working force, particularly work on railroads. In 1870, railroad workers were 3.1% of the Chinese workers. By 1889, this had grown to 19%, most of them found in Wasco County. This increase in railroad workers was related to both a greater program of railroad construction in Oregon and the completion of other western railways (particularly in California) which freed more Chinese for Oregon track laying.

Probably indicative of a fairly constant level of job discrimination, in both 1870 and 1880 there were insignificant numbers of Chinese engaged in any professional or clerical jobs. In 1870, 2% were classifiable in this category; in 1880 there was a decline to 1.5%. This was not a major decline, but the fact that the increase in Chinese population over the years had not increased the professional class would indicate some reluctance by Oregonians to see Chinese engaged in the professions.

It was mentioned previously that 19.5% of the Chinese population of 1870 in the three counties were engaged in pro-

13. In 1880 David Newsom (who lived in the Willamette Valley) wrote: "The Chinamen are nearly all employed upon the railroads and fisheries . . ." *David Newsom: The Western Observer*, 205.

fessional and personal services. In 1880, the same occupations included in that group contained only 14.6% of the laboring Chinamen. Concomitant with this decline was the increase in the number of Chinese engaged in mining, mechanical and manufacturing industries. By 1880, the percentage of the Chinese workers in this larger classification had grown from 5.7 to 52.1%.

Looking at state figures, Oregon had a total working population of 67,343 of which 17,458, or 25.9%, worked in the field of manufacturing, mechanical and mining enterprises.¹⁴ Given the fact that in 1880, there were almost ten times as many Chinese in this field as in 1870, one could conclude that in 1880, they were beginning, at least in our sample counties, to compete more with whites for jobs than in 1870, when they were largely engaged in personal service work. This conclusion, although probably true, is still founded on shaky ground. The 1880 census summary divides the nativity of the working population into six broad categories: Ireland, Germany, Great Britain, Scandinavia, British America, and Other. Hence, Oregon's Chinese in this summary (counted in the "Other" category) are lumped together with numerous nationalities.¹⁵ From the manuscript census, it is determinable that 81% of the "Other" population of Oregon was indeed Chinese. However, it is not determinable what percentage of the "Other" category found in the published census summary for the various occupations was Chinese. Hence, statewide generalizations concerning competition between the white and yellow races for jobs would require a massive amount of work with the manuscript census. But it has been established that, at least within the control group counties, the Chinese had changed their job status and were indeed competing to a greater degree with whites (albeit only 25.9% of whites) for jobs in the growing industries of this area. Keeping in mind that Portland, one of Oregon's biggest political as well as the biggest urban center, is in Multnomah County, one can guess that this growing job competition was at least a factor in anti-Chinese sentiment arising in the late 70s and early 80s in northern Oregon.

14. *Tenth Census*, II: 1366.

15. *Tenth Census*, 1358.

Predominant Occupations of Chinese in Clatsop, Multnomah,
and Wasco Counties 1870 and 1880*

OCCUPATION	1870		1880	
	NUMBER	% OF TOTAL	NUMBER	% OF TOTAL
Cook	50	9.3	56	5.1
Common Laborer	154	28.7	252	23.1
Laundry Worker/ Ironer	121	22.5	72	6.5
Domestic	91	16.9	28	2.5
Professional	11	2.0	17	1.5
Railroad Worker	17	3.1	207	19.0
Merchant	6	1.1	11	1.0
Fisherman	0	0	12	1.1
Cannery Worker	0	0	342	31.4
Dressmaker/ Tailor	0	0	12	1.1
Prostitute	11	2.0	0	0
Miner	11	2.0	1	.09
Total observations	536		1,088	

Of some interest is the fact that in 1880, 3.1% of the control group had attended school within the last year. This is almost triple the percentage of Chinese who had attended school during the year before the 1870 census. This increase in school attendance can be partially attributed to the greater number of school age children. The 1870 sample had a total of 61 children between the ages of 6 and 16, while the 1880 twenty percent sample had 41 between the ages of 7 and 16. However, there were a number of Chinese in their 20s who had attended school between 1879 and 1880. This would seem to indicate a greater effort on the part of the Chinese within these counties to assimilate themselves enough into American society to participate in its educational processes.

The marital status statistics of the 1880 Chinese are incomplete. Of the 1,088 in the sample, 677 were recorded as either being married or single. The breakdown of those 677 people was 23.8% married (260 raw) and 38.3% single (417 raw). As in 1870, the 1880 community was overwhelmingly male, in-

* Calculated from: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, "Manuscript Census of 1870: Oregon," and "Manuscript Census of 1880: Oregon."

cluding only 18 females. The conclusion is then obvious that the majority of these Chinese males who admitted to the census taker that they were married had left their wives in China. This in turn had important implications regarding the overseas remittances of the Chinese to their families in China, for one charge made against open Chinese immigration was that they were detrimental to the American and specifically the West Coast economy. It was said that they made money in America and did not spend it here but rather sent it out of the country.

The last statistic to be viewed in this section is the percentage of Chinese in 1880 who could be determined as having lived with whites. As in 1870, the 1880 sampling showed roughly 10% of these Orientals living in households with whites. This indicates two facts. The first fact illustrated here is that if living with whites is taken as a concrete visibility/interaction factor regarding interracial relations, then both the 1870 and 1880 groups maintained the same level. This is not to say that living with whites is the sole facet of a visibility variable, for the 1880 community, by virtue of having almost three times the population of 1870, was unquestionably more visible. However, in terms of direct interaction between the races regarding life in the same household, both communities were the same. The second fact derived from this statistic is that again, just as in 1870, the 1880 Chinese did predominately live in groups of their own kind. In 1880, 74.6% of the Chinese in the studied counties did indeed live in households exclusively composed of Chinese. Consequently, it is safe to say that during the decade between the censuses, there was enough evidence of Chinese clannishness for this to be used against them in anti-Chinese propaganda.

Through the use of the 1880 manuscript census and sampling techniques, one can see that the character of the 1880 community of Chinese was one of predominately males in their mid-twenties living together. Yet, unlike the 1870 group, there were, in 1880, tendencies for these males to be less concentrated in professional and personal service occupations, more concentrated in mining, mechanical, manufacturing and fishing industries, and displaying a slightly greater effort at assimilability in terms of school attendance.