Text for the WordPress Site “Phantoms of a Rail Town”

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**About:**  
Phantoms of a rail Town is an attempt to tell the story of the Chinese immigrants in Las Vegas, NM during its prosperous railroad boom years. Because, so little remains of any official record and no first hand accounts have ever been found, the story must be told from the pages of the daily newspaper of the time. of particular note is the story of the Yee Shun Affair in which Las Vegas played host to an important milestone in Chinese-American history."

**History:**  
  
The 1880’s were a difficult time for the Chinese people that had come to North America. By 1880, most of the work they had come here to do, working in the mines or on the railroad, had ended with the Gold Rush and the completion of the Transcontinental railroad. A lot of other people were out of work too, and Chinese workers were often pushed out of the jobs that remained, often violently.

The Chinese workers had come, as part of diaspora, fleeing the civil unrest in China that followed the Opium Wars (1839-1860). British foreign policy had left China in a terrible state and many people, mostly young men, voluntarily signed up for indentured servitude with gangs that trafficked in human labor.

The Gold Rush barons of San Francisco, in great need of labor, but with an eye towards statehood were keen to avoid any association with slavery. They got around that by contracting with those gangs already experienced in providing labor to colonial interests in Malaysia, setting the stage for China’s unique form of immigration into North America.

Chinese immigrants called North America, Gum Shan, meaning Gold Mountain. For a majority of Chinese workers, ‘immigrant’ may be not quite accurate. Most laborers came with the intention of working hard, making money, paying off their debt to the traffickers and then going home. Often, it didn’t quite work out that way.

It is likely that Chinese workers came to Las Vegas with the arrival of the Atchison Topeka & Santa Fe rail line in 1879. It is possible that there were a few pioneering souls prior to that, drawn to the prosperity brought by the Santa Fe trail, but there is no recorded mention. The Chinese workers did not come with the railroad laying track, but as laundrymen and cooks. By this time, most of the Chinese people that remained, were looking to become tradesmen and entrepreneurs and become immigrants, or at least run their businesses here.

It appears that the Chinese that came to Las Vegas weren’t exactly greeted with open arms, but neither were they the target of any concerted persecution like in so many other places in North America, around this time. There is no record of anti-Chinese mobs and the fact that Chinese businesses were dispersed throughout the city and not concentrated in a ‘Chinatown’ seems to indicate an air of tolerance. The Chinese laundrymen are not included in records of the civil society the other immigrants and pioneers were building here. Whether that was by mutual agreement is an answer now lost to history.

**The Yee Shun Affair:**  
  
In 1882, Las Vegas played host to an incident that played a crucial role in the advancement of legal rights for Chinese people in the United States and its territories. That incident was the Yee Shun Affair.

Prior to the Yee Shun affair, Chinese people were not considered completely human in the eyes of many of the legal entities that governed the various states and territories, and were not allowed to testify directly in court, even on their own behalf. The Yee Shun Affair, despite being the stuff of farce and tragedy, changed all that.

Depending on who you believe, Yee Shun or ( Wu Sung or Ed Shoon, depending on who was doing the telling) was either an innocent laborer who got of a train to see a friend, and ended up getting framed for murder, or, a Tong assassin sent from Denver, to influence Las Vegas’ lucrative laundry trade.

On February 24, 1882, mere months before the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act, Yee Shun got off a train at the station on East Las Vegas and made his way to John Lee’s laundry at 7 Douglas East. As he waited at the laundry to meet a friend, the owner, John Lee, smoked opium on a pallet in the back while Jo Chinaman ironed in front. Three men were trying to pressure John to sell his laundry when another laundry owner Sam Ling Hang entered from the back and hopped up on an orange crate. Shots were fired, Sam Ling Wing was killed and John Lee was gravely injured. Everyone else ran out of the laundry and on the street, with nowhere to hide, Yee Shun was apprehended on the street by a man out for a stroll with his wife.

A lot of strange things happened at Yee Shun’s trial, on which the court documents and the Optic newspaper sometimes often wildly disagree.

What is known is that almost immediately, some high powered lawyers were sent from Denver to represent the defendants, Yee Shun and John Lee. Unusual for what most people saw as just another murder amongst the Chinese.

John Lee was promptly dismissed as a defendant.

Jo Chinaman, the only witness to the shooting that could be found, changed his story to implicate Yee Shun as the only shooter, some say under the courthouse gaze of Tam K. Tung.

With Jo Chinaman now a prosecution witness, the prosecutor in the case argued that despite not being a Christian, Jo Chinaman understood the difference between right and wrong “according to his Chinese religion” and could therefore testify in Yee Shun’s trial.

His argument was accepted and Jo Chinaman entered history as the first Chinese person to be allowed to testify in a US territorial court as a full human being, a situation which rapidly spread to other territories and states.

Yee Shun is found guilty and sentenced to death. He eventually hanged himself in his jail cell at Leavenworth Kansas.