

24—Chinese Texans

The First Chinese in Texas

People from China were the first of the Asian immigrants, coming to Texas in 1870. They came from the California gold fields. Railroads brought the first 250 Chinese to Calvert, Texas, as laborers to build the railroad in the Brazos River Valley. They were paid \$20 a month plus food and tent lodging along the railroad route.

Another group of 2,600 Chinese men also came from California ten years later in the 1880s, when the Southern Pacific rail line was laid to El Paso. By 1890 the Chinese population in Texas was 710, with 225 in El Paso County.

When the Chinese were needed as workers, all went well for them within their tent communities, but in California and Texas, where large numbers worked with other people, fights, riots, and killings occurred. Apaches at Eagle Pass killed 11 Chinese who were part of a railroad survey crew. In 1882 the government passed the Chinese Exclusion Laws that stopped the immigration of Chinese to Texas for 60 years, except for the Chinese brought from Mexico by General Pershing with the U.S. Army.

Chinese Communities

General John J. Pershing, known as “Black Jack,” brought 527 Chinese from Mexico when he returned to the United States after the failed attempt to capture Pancho Villa.

The Chinese had been in Mexico for centuries working as shipbuilders in Acapulco and as servants on Spanish trading ships.



Joe Chew poses with his wife and seven girls in front of his grocery store in El Paso. Why would he provide free delivery to customers?

Anti-Chinese feelings were present decades later when General Pershing entered Mexico. The Chinese provided food, supplies, and laundry services to the United States troops. The Mexican Chinese came with General Pershing to escape death from the warring Mexicans.

Most of “Pershing’s Chinese” were brought to San Antonio, where they continued to provide services to the army until they were given waivers from the exclusion laws. Many of them opened restaurants and grocery stores, where they did well and became community leaders.

Not until 1942 during World War II, when the Chinese government was friends with the United States, did the immigration laws change and allow the Chinese to come to Texas legally. In 2003 Houston was the center of Chinese life in the state with many celebrations.

Chinese Cultural Folkways

Chinese culture is among the oldest in the world. Modern astronomers studying the stars still use facts about comets and eclipses of the sun gathered by the early Chinese astronomers. Early Chinese doctors wrote books about 311 diseases including diabetes, asthma, and mumps in 300 B.C. Instruction for acupuncture, a method of putting needles at special places on the body to stop pain or help healing, was included.

China is a very big country made up of many tribal groups, but the people of the Han culture make up 92% of the people. Differences in culture exist between the Chinese coming from the north or south and from cities or villages. There are numerous language dialects.

Methods of preparing food vary by region of the country. People from the north like wheat and soybean curd, while those in the south use a lot of rice and vegetables. The southern Cantonese food is cooked only a short time and uses sweet and sour combinations, while Shanghai diners prefer their food well done. Mandarin food is oilier, and the people along the sea like salty seafood dishes. Food enjoyed by Chinese Texans depends on the region of China that was their homeland.

Because most of the Chinese people in Texas were single men or men with wives in China, it was hard for the early Chinese Texans to celebrate their ancient holidays. But in 2003 the Chinese community continued to celebrate the Lunar New Year as a day for everyone's birthday. They included the Chinese invention of firecrackers as well as dragon dances. The color red is for good luck and happiness,

and children were given red envelopes with money.

Amazing Chinese Texans

Sam Hing was a labor contractor who brought Chinese to work on the railroad. He married a New Orleans woman and brought her to live in Texas. On October 14, 1885, a son was born to Sam and his wife in El Paso. The boy was probably the first Chinese child born in Texas.

In 1887 Sam built a large home with all the latest conveniences, but Mrs. Hing left town because the women of El Paso did not accept her.

Mar Yum Eh, or Sam MarDock (1862-1942) came to California in 1874 at the age of 14. Mr. MarDock learned English in California and signed with the railroad to work his way east. In El Paso he worked as an interpreter for other Chinese before moving to Tyler, where he lived for 50 years.

He opened six restaurants, including the Cotton Belt Restaurant. In 1900 he married Wong Shee and built a home for her in Bok Sha, China. He was unable to bring his wife to Texas until 1911 because the immigration laws in the United States were so strict.

Dr. T.F. Sam was a Chinese doctor who practiced in El Paso in 1889. He graduated from a medical college in Canton City, China. For six generations members of his family had treated diseases with herbs made from plants. Dr. Sam's offices were located in the commercial hotel block on St. Louis Street in El Paso.