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CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF IDAHO'S CHINESE POPULATION

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Immediately after Idaho's early gold rush era ended with an excitement along Loon Creek in 1869, a majority of miners were Chinese. At that time, Idaho had more Chinese miners than did any other state or territory. They ought to have been credited with industry, perseverance, skill, and exceptional devotion to Idaho's mining interests at a time when most other fortune seekers had deserted to seek opportunities elsewhere. Occasionally they were. But instead of receiving recognition as builders of Idaho's economy at a critical time, they more often were misunderstood, ridiculed, annoyed by insensitive jokers, and made to feel unwelcome in a land of opportunity and promise.

Chinese litigants or defendants had overwhelming problems when they were involved in legal actions, and special taxes were levied against Chinese miners and Chinese prostitutes. When Chief Justice D. L. Noggle rejected Idaho's discriminatory Chinese miner's tax as unconstitutional, his decision and opinion was popularly denounced as a "mess of baseless, utterly absurd, almost senile, and wretchedly ridiculous slop." Rare exceptions to these disabilities attracted little notice. A Chinese resident of Bellevue gave his hometown a decisive ballot over Hailey in an exceptionally close Alturas County seat contest. (Finally Hailey's promoters dredged up another remote precinct that reversed that result.) And a Boise Chinese gentleman voted as late as 1884. Very few precedents could be cited for such bold incidents. Oriental immigrants got about as welcome a reception in Idaho as foreign devils received in many parts of China. Overwhelming cultural differences accounted for most of that mutual hostility.

By 1886, many Idaho politicians were engaged in a campaign to drive every Chinese resident out to San Francisco where they had a large community that could defend itself against intemperate nativists and trouble makers. A series of violent episodes, including Idaho's Chinese massacre at Pierce, had attracted their emperor's displeasure, resulting in an imperial demand for a State Department investigation of atrocities perpetrated by western foreign devils against his loyal Oriental subjects. Several explanations were available for Idaho's lynching of some unpopular Asian merchants, including a plausible excuse that it was an economy measure to save Shoshone County an expensive trial in distant Murray. Governor E. A. Stevenson went

to some effort to dismiss that embarrassing Pierce City incident as an unimportant transgression, but when an anti-Chinese organization in Hailey threatened to drive out all Oriental settlers from their Wood River homes, he rejected that demand in a formal proclamation, April 27, 1886. When Hailey's Chinese leaders declared they simply would not go, Stevenson upheld their right to stay in that hostile community, and they did. Actually, Idaho's Chinese miners and other fortune seekers all intended to return to their Asian homes when they had recovered sufficient wealth to justify their long trip and hard work. Their refusal to leave prematurely arose from failure of Idaho's mines to provide enough of a reward that they needed before they could afford to return to their native land.

Idaho's anti-Chinese political party did not fare too well in 1886, even though few candidates could afford to criticize commonly accepted excesses against Asian residents. A Boise County sheriff was attacked in 1886 on charges that, when Idaho city's jail "lacked sufficient boarders," he filled it by raids upon local Chinese residents. But he was accused of profiting from his inmate meal charges, rather than of bothering his Oriental constituents. After 1886, anti-Chinese extremists did not necessarily reverse their opposition, but moderate elements emerged and gained public recognition for a more charitable perception of Idaho's Oriental pioneers.

New perceptions of Idaho's Celestials came with significant historic changes then promising to transform China. Exclusion of further Chinese immigration removed a major source of dissatisfaction after 1882, and Idaho's Asian population went into decline at a time when tolerance became more acceptable. A product of racial and cultural intolerance, Chinese exclusion had an incidental effect of undermining and relieving racial tensions that had accounted for rejection of continued Oriental immigration. New Chinese settlers continued to reach Idaho from Asia for more than two decades after 1882, but their numbers were small in comparison with earlier times.

Incidents in Polly Bemis' career as one of Idaho's most distinguished Chinese pioneers illustrate changes in local reactions to talented Asian settlers who had come to a mountain wilderness quite different from their Oriental environment. She arrived in Warren's in 1871 under an indenture to cover her costs for her long voyage from her home in northern China. After she had lived there for a while, Charlie Bemis (a Warren musician) won her contract in a poker game, and they became business associates. Her career included professional experience as a goldsmith, gardener, needleworker, and nurse in addition to her success as a boarding-house cook and dance hall hostess. When Polly and Charlie finally were married in 1894, their new status marked an important transition in Idaho social history. A modified perception of Chinese elements in Idaho culture came with a shift from aversion and misunderstanding to interest in

and eventual appreciation of Chinese aspects of Idaho's heritage.

Polly finally gained extensive national recognition when Eleanor Patterson--later prominent as a newspaper publisher--visited her Salmon Canyon home in 1921 and made her into a celebrity.

Irritating notions of cultural superiority helped to account for friction between western and Chinese miners. Each side resisted any temptation to recognize values in its adversaries' economic or social order. But when an opportunity arose to interest China in accepting more than a few elements of western political as well as technological processes, Idaho communities reacted a bit differently toward Chinese problems. With more than a century of widespread interest in converting all other nations to American democracy and freedom, any opportunity for success of such a program to transform China had considerable local as well as national appeal.

International developments, related to western influence in China and Japan, helped to speed Idaho's acceptance of Chinese pioneers. After centuries of intense resistance to western culture prior to 1840, Japan finally had utilized European equipment and military procedures to defeat China in an 1894 imperial war in which Japan captured part of China and detached Korea from Chinese control. This humiliation affected Chinese nationalists everywhere. A Chinese cook in Hailey became so disgusted that he abandoned all his Oriental traditions, learned good English, and emerged as a local pioneer, indistinguishable from his Wood River neighbors. But a large number of western Chinese supported a China Reform Association that endorsed an ambitious westernization program that Emperor Kuang Hsu enacted in 1898. After only a hundred days, his Chinese new deal collapsed when Empress Dowager Tzu Hsi regained control, September 22. Chinese institutions could not be supplanted quite so abruptly, and managers of Kuang's reform movement had to go into exile. Distinguished Chinese scholars and political leaders toured North American Oriental settlements, where they gained a warm public reception. Boise and Pocatello had large China Reform Association chapters, and their parades to welcome national leaders from China attracted broad community support in 1903. By that time, Idaho's Chinese pioneers had become a respected cultural asset, and local Chinese scholars achieved recognition that they had deserved for many years. Practice of Chinese medicine, for example, gained acceptance beyond Boise's Oriental community. Missionaries to China had taken a major part in suggesting and promoting western reform in Asia, and Idaho churches offered a similar option to local Chinese residents. An incidental result of special church services for Asians was more friendly interracial relationships.

Along with their demonstrations of support for westernization of China, Idaho's Celestials tended to convert to western culture themselves. By 1912, Boise's Chinese temple was closed; eventually its large brick building was converted into a

local Chamber of Commerce, while its interior survived only as a superlative display for visitors to Idaho's state historical museum. By 1917, Boise's Chinese community was participating in wartime Red Cross Activities, and most old cultural aversions were disappearing. Although a 1917 shooting fracas--interpreted locally as a tong war--created some continued distrust, old hostility was much less evident in twentieth-century Chinese relations with other Idaho settlers.

Some of Idaho's old pioneer Oriental miners continued to retire to China in accordance with their original plans even though they no longer faced severe local antagonism. Kirtley Sam, for example, left Salmon in 1907 with \$11,000 he had saved from his forty years of mining--a fortune that would "make him a big man in china." But other Leesburg and Lemhi miners continued to live in their old placer camps for forty and fifty years. Rocky Bar, Idaho City, Pierce, and other early Idaho mining centers had their scattering of elderly Chinese pioneers who had come to places like Loon Creek in 1869 and had finally gained respect for their long careers as successful miners or gardeners.

Others operated laundries or overcome community suspicion as successful restaurant operators. Boise's traditional Chinese gardens continued for more than eighty years, and although some of Boise's elderly Chinese citizens had to retain their traditional caution in dealing with non-Asian elements after a century of settlement, their descendants faced no such problems.

Almost a century had gone by since Idaho voters began to gain an improved perception of their Chinese associates with old suspicions gradually replaced by a clearer understanding of Asian culture.

Information provided by Larry Jones