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REFERENCE SERIES

C. K. AH FONG - 1845-1927

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Ah Fong Chuck was a skilled herbalist and general medical practitioner who was one of the most widely known and respected members of the Chinese community in Idaho for over sixty years. He became an example of determination to those struggling in the harsh, and often unfriendly, western frontier. His legacy provides a unique lens through which to view Idaho's Chinese community and the role of Chinese medicine in the United States.

He was born October 5, 1845 in Canton Province, China, and received his medical degree from Kung Guh Medical College in 1867. His training included acupuncture, the use of medicinal herbs, and diagnostic procedures. While Ah Fong Chuck was a youth a severe civil war waged in China. In 1867 invading armies conquered Canton Province and labeled all who resisted traitors.

Having been resistors, Ah Fong Chuck and his father, Dr. Whey Fong, fled to San Francisco that same year. A transposition of his name by immigration authorities at the Port of San Francisco caused an error on the official immigration documents. From that time forward Ah Fong Chuck was known as C. K. Ah Fong.

Because of Ah Fong's youth and experience as a physician, he struggled in San Francisco. Consequently, he moved to Rocky Bar, Idaho to treat the large number of Chinese immigrants working in the mines during Idaho's gold rush. As he had hoped, he was greatly needed in the area, and treated both Asian and non-Asian patients from Rocky Bar and Atlanta. Besides his medicinal practice, Ah Fong opened an apothecary store selling herbs, teas, and general merchandise.

Both his medical practice and apothecary business were successful until 1892, when a fire burned down most of Rocky Bar.

Consequently, Ah Fong moved to Boise, where both his medical practice and apothecary business also flourished. His general medical practice became more specialized in Boise. His newspaper advertisements note his specialty in treating women's diseases, infertility, and venereal disease. As had been the case in Rocky Bar Ah Fong's, clientele were both Chinese and Caucasian.

In 1899 the Idaho State Legislature passed legislation requiring all physicians to meet new licensing requirements, one of which included a requirement of intent to become an American citizen. Ah Fong identified this as an attempt to discriminate against any new immigrants and filed suit against the licensing agency when denied a license to practice medicine. After losing in the District Court, Ah Fong appealed to the Idaho State

Supreme Court, which found in favor of Ah Fong. The Court required the licensing board to reconsider Ah Fong's medical license application. After two more submittals, Ah Fong's request for a medical license was granted.

C. K. Ah Fong's medical practice and Boise apothecary flourished until his death in 1927 at the age of 83. During his lifetime he had married three times, and had two children and two adopted children. All three wives predeceased Ah Fong.

His apothecary business was continued by his eldest son Herbert, and his grandson, Gerald. By 1964 the Chinese community was virtually gone and in 1971 the building that contained the apothecary was torn down. However, the apothecary collection that remained can be seen in a display at the Idaho State Historical Society Museum in Boise, Idaho.

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