

Canton Army in the High Sierras: A Mini Documentary from Ancestors in the Americas

by Loni Ding (25 min.)

Rough Draft Transcription by
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(editing & corrections needed)

Opening of the video:

Male Voice: "Europe now stands between America and Asia. Build this railroad ... and America will stand between Europe and Asian."

John C. Fremont, U.S. Army Engineer
Explorer/Map Maker. U.S. Far West.

Female Voice: (Christopher) Columbus (1492) was looking for Asia when he came upon America. And Thomas Jefferson (1803-1806) was looking for trade with Asia when he sent Louis and Clark off to the Pacific.

Now John Fremont agrees that the transcontinental railroad is worth building because it could make America itself the new gateway to Asia.

All three men, Columbus, Jefferson, and Fremont had Asia on the mind.

It is in the middle the Civil War when Abraham Lincoln signed the Bill that launched the building of America's first Transcontinental Railroad (Pacific Railroad Act 1863).

Lincoln gambled that this railroad can bring silver from Nevada and gold from California to fill the Union Army's war chest. But it would be monumentally difficult like nothing else in the world. Was it really worth building.

Without the Continental, there was then only three routes for travel to the American West. All of them risk your life and took forever.

First, there was the Prairie Route. Wagons crossing the Great Plain homeland of a numberless Indian Nations. Travelers worrying about Indian attacks while also suffering disasters large and small. Everyday during the journey took half a year (6-8 months).

Or you could go to Central America. The route to cross is the Isthmus of Panama. Fifty miles through the tropical jungle heat and risking disease like cholera.

Finally, you can take the South America route. Sailing down through the Atlantic coast of South America, rounding the Cape

Horn at the tip. Six to eight months of terrific waves. Living with rotten beans and bugs in the beans.

What a difference with the Transcontinental. People riding in comfort and safety. Goods and massive freight shipped in the train carts all crossing the continent east and west in 5 to 6 days.

So two major railroad companies locked in epic competition to build the Transcontinental. The Union Pacific, starting out of Omaha Nebraska. The Central Pacific, out of Sacramento California, race each other across the continent. Where ever they finally meet. Who would have laid the most mile of the railroad track. Because they will be paid by the mile of track laid.

| | |
|-------------|-------------------|
| Flat Land | \$16,000 per mile |
| High Desert | \$32,000 per mile |
| Mountains | \$48,000 per mile |

Female Voice: More important, they race each other for the huge fee land grant and each side the rail was laid. The lumber alone on the free land if they just cut one tree per acre was worth \$150 million.

A Sign: Golden Spike Railroad Bed
Two Trains moving along train tracks

Male Ranger Rick Wilson: This is the actual spot where the Transcontinental Railroad was completed. The Chinese workers had many people gather into space of those cells as they could; two 12 hour shifts. Leland Stanford, the president of the Central Pacific Railroad, he also happened to be the governor of California at this time. He made a campaign promise, that if elected, he was going to rid of California of this Chinese curse.

Golden Spike National Historic Site
Promontory Summit Utah

Golden Spike National Historic Site
Promontory Summit, Utah.

Female voice (Prof. Patricia Limerick): People know that the Chinese built the railroad. Often that is the one and only thing they know. That is exactly the problem. For instance, there is a book Westward Expansion (by Billington), which is a classic old style frontier history. When you look into the index for the Chinese, there is one page, two sentences: "Chinese, build railroads, (355-6)"

Male Voice RR Worker: "Seven thousand pigtailed workers hacked out the right-of-way, their broad straw hats and flapping trousers forming a picturesque sight as they trundled wheelbarrows of dirt of scampered away from charges of

blasting powder." p. 556, Westward Expansion, 5th Edition, 1982, 698 pgs.

Male Voice (Railroad worker): We did not understand why they were always so interested in our clothing and how we looked. "Scampered away from blasting powder?" Insect scamper. Little children scamper. Grown men run for their lives.

Female Professor (Prof. Patricia Limerick): You heard much more about Irish built the Union Pacific encountering the interesting plain and Indians having ventures with the Sues so on.

And in fact the drama of building across the great plain versus the drama of building through the Sierras. The flat even the regular landscape of the plain versus just the precipitous of ...

Screen Notes: Bloomer Cut 1865.
Bloomer Cut 1990's Colfax, California near Sacramento

Male Voice RR Worker: There it is, Cape Horn (Railroad Track). Our first big job. We stood on the top and looked. We saw the side of Cape Horn was straight down. How to carve a ledge onto this mountain side and wide enough to lay a railroad bed. Our workers told the big boss. **We do something very hard like this in China.** We want to try to do this here.

Male Voice John Eldredge (historian, Utah: The incredible things is that this is all done by manual labor. They had no heavy equipment like they would use on a roll bed today. It was all done with picks, shovels. Back breaking efforts. Just can't imagine how many men and how many hours

Cape Horn, a train coming around...

Male Voice RR Worker: Yes, we do blast out that ledge and lay the railroad.

Male Voice Robert Dowty (Locomotive Engineer, Golden Spike National Historic Site): You know, without the Chinese labor, they would never have made it. Because they couldn't get the help.

Male Ranger Rick Wilson: The main reason people went to California is the gold rush. Almost daily people were striking it rich never have to work the rest of their lives. Here the railroad came and advertising back breaking type work twelve hours or more, a dollar a day. They couldn't get the people They advertised and get one quarter of the people they needed to do the work. The Chinese at the time was the last resort for the Central Pacific.

William Strobridge (Central Pacific

Superintendent): I will not be responsible for any railroad built by Chinamen. They are not capable of doing the work.

Railroad Recruitment Ad China, 1860's.

Female Voice: But the superintendent was over ruled by his boss.

Charles Crocker (Central Pacific Owner): They did built the Great Wall of China. Why not tried them?.

Male Voice John Eldredge (Historian, Utah): At the height of construction, there were actually ten Chinese brought from China against one White worker. It was all done foreign labor.

Central Pacific

10 Chinese worker for 1 White worker

Union Pacific -Nearly all White workers.

The Chinese, when they started the railroad were mainly the back works, pig and shovels, lifting dirt, harling material, that is the builders of railroad learned how skillful they can be, they were soon doing everything. They were doing everything, the rock work, blasting the rock, and drilling. They would lay ties, putting them in position, lining them, would spike them in position, bolstering them. They did about all kinds of work.

Narrator Female: It was the task of the Chinese to build thirteen tunnels through these granites of the Sierra Nevada. Granites so hard that a whole days worth might only yield nine inches. Getting through the Sierra would take three years.

Male Voice Philip Choy: The most difficult job is digging tunnels. They used a crew of Chinese starting from the top of the proposed tunnel and working to the center. At the same time from the outside, they would work inward. On the top where they want to .. they would send two crew working outward . So this was done with a lot of labor, a lot of blasting. Chinese were really sacrificing their lives doing this kind of work.

Male Voice Robert Dowty: They use Chinese labor in blasting. They would lower the Chinese down over the cliff of the Sierra in like a kind a wicker basket.

Male Voice RR Workder: First we weave out old style Chinese baskets strong and big enough to hold a man. Tie a rope to it, climb in. Then lower the basket over the cliff. He takes out his tool, drill a hole in the mountain rock, pushes in the blasting power and a fuse, starts it burning, and

then called: "pull me up, quick!"

Narrator: But by some chance he didn't get him out of there in time, they knew a certain percentages of the men is going to die in setting those charges

There is picture of Strobrige, the superintendent. He carried a wipe and he used that wipe at will and treated the Chinese as if there were not human being.

"... With his one good eye he could spot the ring leader and freely apply the strong and handy use of an axe handle on the Chinamen..."

Admiring quote from Strobridge aide

Woman Narrator: In the winter, the Chinese were working in round the clock shift in the tunnel, on the banks of snows, freezing and wet. The managers were in train carts. The workers slept in tents. No protections against snow storms that swept into the camps. Everlanches swept a whole camp down the Mountain side. Their frozen bodies not found until the snow melted the following Spring.

The Chinese were worked merciless, from sun up to sun down

Finally we went on strike. Eight hours good for White man, all the same, good for Chinamen. What we want, no more beating and same pay as White man.

2000 Chinese workers Strike Central Pacific June 8, 1867.

Narrator Female: The Central Pacific played their ultimate card. They withheld all food from the Chinese. After one week, the Chinese workers, isolated in the Sierra, had to give in.

Dried Chinese Foods cooked by the workers: shrimp, mushrooms, fish, scallops, duck, squid, abalone, sausage, salted vegetables ...

Narrator Female: Small gains were won. The beating stopped. The wages improved. Still not as the same pay as the White man.

Other historians had said that the Chinese worshipped Strobrige as some kind of god ... "Mak Ga Hi ..." Actually, if you know Chinese, that is "Mother F."

Man narrator: It is really quite interesting to learn about their culture and how they lived and contrasted how everybody was living and acting.

John Eldredge: Lot of the Union Pacific camps people were killed everyday. They thought nothing of it. Then when I studied

the Chinese, I found that these people cared for each other and they were concerned. They had organizations (i.e. Chinese District Association, California, 1888) where they actually get together and help each other. That was not happening to everybody else. Everybody else were on their own. They were having problems but nobody was there to help them. Actually they were not related but they lived in a family atmosphere. Somebody took care of the cooking. Somebody took care of the washing. They brought their food in groups, ate together. And these people shared a lot of their wages.

Rock Cave, Utah, used by Chinese Railroad workers as living quarters 1860's.

They lived in here because it was cool in the hot sun. And at night it would provide warmth, an ideal place to get in and out of the elements.

Woman: The strike was not a big success. But it nevertheless, it forcefully reminded the Central Pacific of their utter dependence on Chinese labor that were 90% of their work force and critical for the final push.

At that very moment of uncertainty for the Central Pacific, a U.S. China treaty that ease the immigration of Chinese workers needed by the railroad was soon to be signed.

The treaty delegated from China arrived in Washington D.C. causing quite a stir. The American for the first time saw the China dragon flag of the Emperor flying from the mansion of the nation's capital.

Anson Burlingame, Treaty negotiator in behalf of China

Burlingame-Seward Treaty of Peace, Amity, Commerce

The Burlingame treaty assured that Chinese Americans could freely come and go to which ever country, visiting, doing business, and even settling as permanent residents.

Treaty Affirms for Chinese in America "the inherent and inalienable right to change home and allegiance ... but denied right of citizenship...

...privilege of public education...
...protection of religion and cemeteries."

The treaty was signed in 1868 just one year before the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad.

Burlingame-Seward Treaty of Peace, Amity, Commerce signed by William E.

Seward
U.S. Secty. of State
Anson Burlingame
Plenipotentiary for His Majesty, Ta Tsing,
Emperor of China
Chi-Kang
Sun Chia-Ru
Envoy of Tai Tsing Empire
July, 28, 1868

Woman: The Central Pacific Railroad,
shaken by the Chinese workers strike, now
had a treaty, assure uninterrupted supply
Chinese labor for their railroad.

1867 Chinese Strike
1868 Burlingame Treaty
1869 Transcontinental Railroad
completed

The Burlingame Treaty, and the fourteen
amendment, was the legal basis for protest
and challenges of the Chinese community
when their rights were later repeatedly
violated.

Civil Rights Violations Against Chinese
1870 Page Law discouraging
immigration of Chinese women as potential
prostitutes.

1875 Post-Transcontinental railway
expulsions and riots in Western states

1882 Chinese Exclusion Act based on
renegotiated Burlingame Treaty.

Competing Central Pacific Chinese
Crews set track laying record promontory
Point, Utah (10 Miles of Track, laid in one
day, April 29th, 1869.

Central Pacific
Momento to Promontory Summits Jan.
12, 1863 to May 10, 1869

Ranger: It was a monumento victory to
the Central Pacific getting through the
Sierra Nevada. Originally the meeting point
of the two railroads were not Promontory
Summit, Utah. Originally, it was set at the
Nevada border with California. They didn't
figure that there was anyway that the
Central Pacific could do any better than just
to get through the Sierra Nevada in the
same amount of time of the Union Pacific to
go all the way across Nebraska, Wyoming
and Utah.

Music, Train coming

Professor: That famous picture for the
completion of the Transcontinental Railroad
where the golden spike was going to be
hammered in and a bunch of politicians
were going to give speeches and so on,
many noted that the Chinese were not

there. That there was a tremendous irony
that the Chinese did the labor but not in the
picture.

The reporters are covering the wrong
ceremony. Reporters are there at the dare
ceremony. are over there at the dog
ceremony?

Move the photographer. Have him
photograph the people who built the
railroad.

Woman Narrator: And if we do the
photographer, what picture might there be
instead?

Narrator: Did we want to be in the
picture? Yes. The whole world was there.
And with the picture, we can show our
family, our village, we were there too. We
did this, but we knew they do not want
Chinaman to be in the picture. And we do
not push ourselves like unwanted guests.
That is not our way. Still, someday,
somebody should tell the truth.

The two big iron road, done. The two big
trains, together.

We have a big party for ourselves. Eat
all the good food we get from China, and
cook everyday for ourselves here at the
mountain.

Dry ducks, mushroom, dried scallops,
shrimps, sausage, salted vegetables. And
we remember everything, all the things
would not know we could do, we talked
about that. And our friends who died, our
fallen countrymen, we remember them.

Each time someone dies, we write down
the place where we buried them. Then in
maybe ten years, someone can come back
to gather up the bone and send them home
to village in China. Here there will be no
one to tend their graves.

We must to that for each other. We
could not face their kins if we did not. There
ghost can not be left here wondering, lost in
these mountains, homeless forever.

Woman: Building the transcontinental
establish the nation that stretch from sea to
shining sea. This achievement, Chinese
sometimes paid with their lives. Exactly how
many I do not know. The one news reporter
writing at the time gives a clue.

Bones in Transit

... The accumulative bones of perhaps
1,200 Chinamen came in by eastern train
yesterday, alone the line of the Central
Pacific Railroad. The lot comprises about
20,000 pounds.

"Nearly all of them are the remains of

employees of the company who were
engaged in building the railroad.

"Their religious customs require that
when possible the bones will be interred
under home soil. These bones are on their
way back to China."

Sacramento Reporter, June 30, 1870.

John Eldredge: I identify with the
Chinese of what happened. I have
developed a real love for these people for
what they accomplished, great
contributions. Sometimes when I give
these presentation to different group and I
am telling their stories, I get very emotional.

The End

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