

KJ PLAGGEMEYER READING
BIG TIMBER ROOTS
 AN ACCOUNT OF THE MONTANA FRONTIER

...Montana...

"Today, the culture of the American Midwest is largely viewed as a homogeneous population. The small towns that litter the landscape of the Northern Rockies and the Great Plains project a relaxed, rural atmosphere. Everything from clothing styles to vehicle choices appear to be safely conservative. Even so, the development of these communities is a credit to the pioneering dedication of many diverse immigrating groups. Each approached the frontier west with a unique outlook on becoming American. Some immigrant groups adjusted to rural farming and ranching, surviving for generations in the same area. Other groups were extremely influential for a few decades, then faded away with the passage of time. Reaching a historical understanding of the pioneering experience of all immigrant groups is invaluable in interpreting American identity.

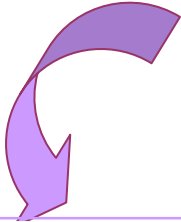
--KJ Plaggemeyer, Author

Big Timber was established in 1883 on the flats above the meeting of the Boulder River, Big Timber Creek, and Yellowstone River as a commerce hub. The small community's settlers were largely Scandinavian, most from connected family groups who had emigrated from the Nordic nations searching for new rural farming lands. The original town, Dornix, had been established several years earlier in an area closer to the river confluence, but when plans for a railroad across southern Montana were solidified a new town was planned for higher ground. The town grew with an industrial base of raising sheep, for meat as well as wool harvesting.


The prosperity of the community relied heavily on shipping livestock to the urban packaging area of Chicago and other eastern cities. At the turn of the century, railroad crews plowed through southern Montana, building the Northern Pacific Railroad. A majority of the labor crews were composed of Chinese immigrants, enticed by the pay offered by the railroad. Western railroad managers favored hiring Chinese workers over other ethnic groups because of their united work effort, aversion to striking demands, and health resilience. Unlike other water-consuming crews, Chinese crews often drank water in boiled tea, a practice which helped to neutralize contaminated water supplies. Crews were often hired as a group so they felt some cultural support as they suffered through the back-breaking work of laying down railroad. As the railroad reached the Big Timber area, several different Chinese railroad crews were stationed in the town. Few of the workers spoke any English. Although the railroad was paying workers up to forty cents an hour, most Chinese railroad workers lived in great poverty. Most of the wages earned by the Chinamen were sent back to China to help support their families who were still living there.

Railroad completion led the small community into an economic boom. By the end of the 1800's Big Timber had become one of the largest wool shipping centers in the country. In 1901 the Northern Pacific wool warehouse was built to accommodate for the immense wool shipments. With the approach of each autumn, families rented entire train cars to haul livestock and wool to eastern markets. Passenger trains also began running the track, b

After working in the community for some time, a number of the Chinese railroad workers elected to stay when rail work moved on. The growing town contained a large shipping area, but lacked for commercial businesses. Records of numerous Chinese restaurants and laundries span thirty years of Big Timber history. In fact, all of the restaurants in the first third of the 1900's were Chinese. Others went to work for wealthy community members, as cooks, butlers, and maids. Unlike today's businesses, the Chinese of the early 1900's were not fierce competitors. The Chinese community was rather small at any given time, numbering only twenty-five to thirty people. They were able to survive and prosper by living as a merchant group, living near or in their operating businesses.



The important role of immigrant populations at the turn of the century is undeniable. Big Timber would not have flourished without the services innovative Chinese immigrants provided. Yet, the community now shows neither evidence nor appreciation for its Chinese pioneers. Like in many Midwestern communities, the triumphs and struggles of these immigrants have faded with the passage of time. Their memory exists mainly in the childhood memories of today's community elders, along with a few brief entries in the Big Timber Pioneer, the community's long-running local newspaper. Here are a few flashes of Big Timber's Chinese heritage.



In 1899 a Chinaman named Sam Lee operated a laundry located north of Bramble's Restaurant. By 1917 he had become the head chef of the Bramble Hotel and a reputation as a good poker player. He owned property in Livingston and Billings which he eventually sold to Northern Pacific. After selling he moved to Bozeman.

Henry's Big Restaurant was opened in 1905 by Long Kong Comlee and Henry Comlee. It offered a specialty of turtle soup, choice meats, cucumber salad, mashed potatoes, a variety of pie choices, and an after dinner cigar all for twenty five cents.

Tom Kue arrived in 1905 and began cooking for the Grand Hotel. He built his own restaurant, the Golden Eagle, on McLeod Street and operated the Schlitz Saloon. Later he started another restaurant, the American Eagle, on upper McLeod. The American Eagle, however, was a failing business investment. He left Big Timber on December 17, 1924 to the sadness of many friends and customers. He was on his way to San Francisco with plans to return to China. The Golden Eagle was then converted into a creamery and today is the Hospitality House. Another of Kue's buildings became the Cort Hotel's pool building.

One of the most prosperous Chinamen in Big Timber was Charles Hop Sing Yim. He arrived in 1906 and resided there until at least 1926. As a respected businessman he owned a grocery store, restaurant, and laundry. The restaurant, located at 36 McLeod, was a popular stop for cattlemen during shipping time. His special bread was especially appreciated.

The Chinese laundries in Big Timber were very successful at the turn of the century. In 1906, several laundries were in operation. Charles Hop Sing Yim owned one located in the alley behind his restaurant. Another was owned by Leong Woo. Laundry disputes arose sometime around 1906 over stealing customers. One Chinaman would gain a customer, but before the laundry was picked up, the competing laundry's China boy would steal the garments and deliver them to the waiting customer. Customers did not recognize the difference between the laundries, so they would simply pay whoever delivered the garments.

Leong Woo's laundry was unfortunately destroyed in the fire of 1908. The fire's beginning was identified to be train sparks which ignited the grass by the stockyards. Strong winds then carried the flames into town. It remains the largest fire in Big Timber history with losses totaling over \$400,000, mostly uninsured. Woo, after seeking legal advise, decided it was better to cut his losses. He announced he would not present a claim to Northern Pacific, but urged his customers to issue their own claims for the loss of clothing burned with the store.

In 1907 the only three restaurants in Big Timber were Chinese. The Home, Half Moon Café, and Golden Eagle were all located along McLeod Street. The proprietors of all these restaurants were well liked and appreciated for their cooking talents. The Home was operated by a Chinaman referred to as "Big Charlie". Half Moon Café was owned by two brothers. This building later became Solberg's Clothing Store which operated up into the 1990's.

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There is evidence of one China boy attending school in the community. Chang was a first grader who spoke no English when he started school. He quickly made friends and spent much of his time playing games in the schoolyards. He left after one term of school to return to China. When his classmates asked him when he would return he only said "Maybe twenty years".

The folklore of tunnels running under the town is still a topic of great debate. According to some myths, tunnels were used for illegal opium trade. The nighttime movement of four passenger trains could have served as a cover for the dealings, as well as providing an easily accessible outgoing transport. Big Timber was the suspected center for opium movement in the state at one point. The only documental evidence for the trade, however, was the frequent deposit of large checks into the town's banks by laboring Chinamen.

There is evidence of at least two tunnels in Big Timber. The first tunnel was not Chinese at all, but rather a barroom convenience. The tunnel spanned from Bely Saloon up to an icehouse on a nearby hill. Carts were rolled on tracks down the tunnel to

One of the more colorful Chinamen of Big Timber was the garbage man for the Chinese restaurants. He was referred to as Frenchie, although one account named him "Old Irish". No records elaborate on his name origins. He wore a "yellow rain coat, rubber gun boots up to his knees, and a flat cloth hat". His face was covered with scars from a fire. He had come up the Yellowstone panning for gold and had some hidden gold dust in his shack. When the shack caught fire, he ran inside to save the gold. The effort was successful but he was severely burned in the process.

Frenchie collected all the garbage from the Chinese restaurants and brought it down to the fairgrounds to feed to his hogs. His pigpens were constructed of orange and apple crates filled with dirt and stacked on top of each other. Frenchie's home was a twelve-foot room of pine boards located in the middle of the shed. Holes in the boards allowed the warmth of the pigs to radiate into his room in the wintertime

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