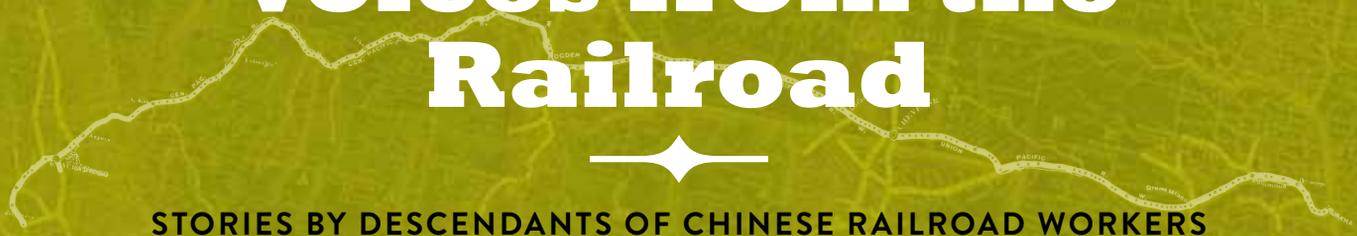
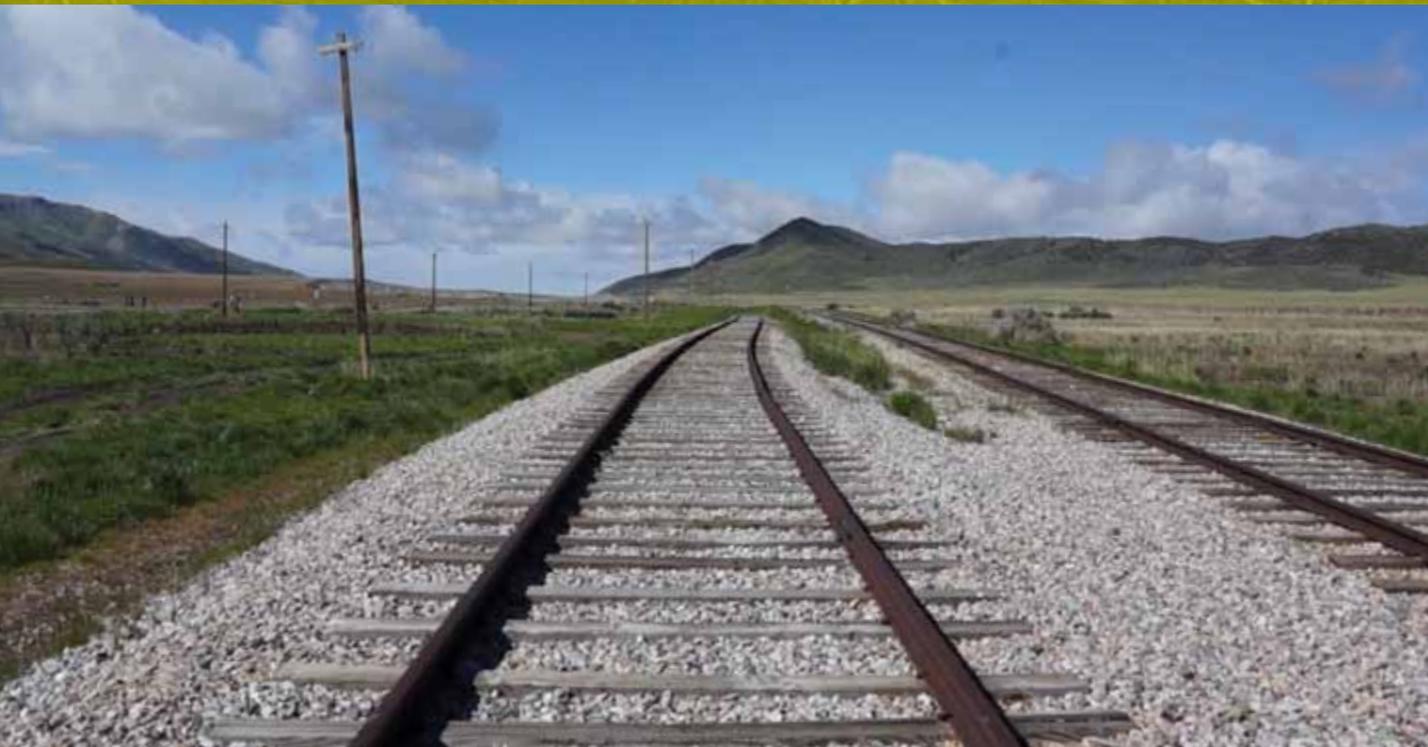




# Voices from the Railroad



STORIES BY DESCENDANTS OF CHINESE RAILROAD WORKERS





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Family Reunion—Descendants of Hung Lai Woh and Tom Ying, 2004.



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Hong Family, 1903.

## Hung Lai Woh was a great grandfather I never met.

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Russell N. Low

**W**hile the stories of most of the early Chinese pioneers have been lost, a very few have been preserved. The story of Hung Lai Woh is one that is seeing the light of day as we clear away a century and a half of haze and neglect. His tale describing how a teenage Chinese boy immigrated to Gum Saan and then found a life in America, encapsulizes the early Chinese experience in this country. It is also the story of our family.

Hung Lai Woh was a great-grandfather I never met. For many in my family it is a name that might have been forgotten except for the oral history preserved by his son Kim Seung Hong.

At his 100th birthday celebration in February 1994, Kim Hong was asked to tell us about his father. He often spoke of his mother with great affection but rarely mentioned his father. His spontaneous answer was a remarkable story that was preserved on video for all by my sister Laurel.

*“It so happened, you know, in my father’s time, that was before the turn of the century, that Leland Stanford, Crocker, Huntington, I think Leland Stanford was commissioned to build the Central Pacific Railroad, which is now the Southern Pacific.*

*In many months, you know, at the beginning they were getting nowhere with the American labor. Every weekend they go out on a binge and nobody come to work Monday. And they had, and in not many months they only built about twenty-seven miles.*

*So, Leland Stanford says, this will never do. We’ll have to bring some Chinese over here, because, if they could build a Great Wall, they could build a railroad in no time. So they got a lot of Chinese to come over here. Amongst them are my father and my uncle that was in that group.*

*They finished building the Central Pacific that joined up at Promontory May 10th, 1869. They drove the golden spike that joined the Central Pacific with the Union Pacific completing*

*the first Transcontinental Railroad. Of course, you know the Central Pacific is now the Southern Pacific.*

*My father came over. My uncle came over. Unfortunately, my uncle lost an eye blasting across the snow shed, which runs through the Cascade Mountain towards Reno.*

*They started a family about that time and I saw the first light of day before the end of the century.”*

Thus began a journey of discovery of our Hong family history. Uncle Kim referred to them as the “Pioneer Hong.”

Hung Lai Woh was born in 1850 in the Dai Long Village in the Kwangtung Province of Southern China. He was the fourth son of Hung Long Yin. His father, Hung Long Yin had five sons named Doc Woh, Wing Ye, Jick Woh, Lai Woh, and Fun Woh. Their mother was from the Ham family. As a married woman she was called Hung Ham Shee.

In the 1800s many of the men from Dai Long Village went to Gum Saan or the Gold Mountain to find work. They sent money back to China to support their families. So many men left Dai Long that it became known as the “Village of the Foreign Chinese.”

Sometime in the mid 1860’s Hung Lai Woh came to Gum Saan as a teenager to work on the Central Pacific Railroad. He was accompanied by one of his four brothers, who also worked with him on the Transcontinental Railroad.

During the Hung brother’s work on the railroad, they helped to build the snow sheds that protected the tracks from the heavy snowfall in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. The work was dangerous and accidents and deaths were common place. While building a snow shed in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, Hung Lai Woh’s brother lost the use of an eye in one of the many blasting accidents. Their work on the Transcontinental Railroad eventually took them to Promontory Point, Utah in 1869.

After completion of the railroad Hung Lai Woh did not return to California until 1871. While most of the railroad workers returned to their homes in China, my great-grandfather chose San Francisco as his new home in America. He found work making cigars in San Francisco. Cigar making was small industry that at one time employed 4000 Chinese in San Francisco. Hung Lai Woh was paid \$8–\$10 per week to roll cigars. He later became a merchant and owned his own cigar store in Chinatown.

Finding a wife to start his family in Gum Saan would not be easy. Chinese women were very rare in Gum Saan. The women stayed behind in the villages in Southern China, while their men worked in America and sent money home to support their families. Chinese women rarely came to America



Dai Long Village, China.

Russell N. Low Collection

voluntarily. After 1882 the Chinese Exclusion Act prevented the immigration of almost all Chinese to America. The prospects for a young Chinese man to find a wife in Gum Saan were dismal.

Hung Lai Woh was one of the lucky ones. In 1888 he met Tom Ying, who was a 17 year old Chinese woman in San Francisco. Tom Ying was born in Bok Sar Village in 1871 and had been brought to Gum Saan as an 8-year old. Family oral history stated that she was brought to America by missionaries. The truth is more likely that Tom Ying came to this country as a slave or servant and was rescued by missionaries in Dai Fow (San Francisco). For many years she continued to live with them at the Presbyterian Occidental Home for Chinese Girls on Sacramento Street. This home was later renamed the Cameron House. Hung Lai Woh and Tom Ying were married in 1888.

The Hungs first lived at 711 Commercial Street in Chinatown. Hung Woh continued to make cigars until the Chinese were driven out of this industry. Tom Ying worked as a midwife and as a seamstress. She brought many Chinese babies into the world in Dai Fow.

Hung Lai Woh and Tom Ying, whose married name was Hong Tom Shee, raised five children in Chinatown. The first child, a girl was born on March 4, 1890, and was named Hong Kee. Her family called her Ah Kee. She would later assume her American name “Kay.” The first-born son, Hong Bing Quong, was born on November 3, 1891. The second daughter Hong Chun Ngou was born on March 18, 1893 and was later called “Sister Gin.” Hong Kim Seung was born on February 7, 1894. The baby of the family, Hong Toon, later called Ed, was born on July 10, 1896.

At the turn of the century Chinatown was in decline. Money and food were scarce. In 1903 the oldest daughter 13 year old Ah Kee (Kay) married Low Sun Fook a successful businessman who owned a laundry, dry goods store, and several hop farms in Salem, Oregon. Her sister Chun Ngo recalled that sister Ah Kee had to marry very young so that the rest of the family would have enough food to eat. In 1904 Bing who was 12 years old and younger brother Kim were sent to live with an uncle in Kalispell, Montana.

Decades later Kim recalled, “I went with my uncle Yick Leurng to Kalispell. He was a very enterprising man. He sold lingerie to ladies of the night. He needed somebody to watch the store. I go to school and I came back for lunch. I worked as a busboy at the Bong Tong Restaurant. I made 50 cents per day. Uncle Bing made 50 cents per day. That’s 30 dollars. Both of us made 60 dollars. We send that back to mother. That was a lot of money then when you can buy a pound of ham for 10 cents and get a shirt for a dollar and a half. Every month we send it back to mother.”

Hung Lai Woh died in December 1905 from Beri Beri, a vitamin deficiency common in people who eat only polished rice. Only four months later in April 1906, Chinatown was destroyed by the great San Francisco Earthquake and Fire. Tom Ying, and her children Chung Ngo and Ed Toon survived and later settled in Oakland. All the children except Bing would marry and raise families.

Kay moved to Salem, Oregon where her husband treasured his young wife like a rare jewel. They raised ten children. Among the children were some of the first Chinese women to attend American universities. One became a physician, a rare accomplishment for a Chinese woman in the first half of the 20th century.



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Low Family in Salem, Oregon, 1918.

Among her other children were another physician, carpenter, teacher, chemist, laboratory technician, and decorated war heroes. Her son Loren was awarded a Silver Star for bravery in combat on Saipan in WWII. During a Japanese bombing attack he valiantly risked his life to save the men in his battalion and to preserve the strategically vital Aslito airfield in June 1944.

Loren's younger brother Stanley was a tail gunner on a B24 Liberator who gave his life for his country in action over New Guinea in the South Pacific. Stanley was awarded the Air Medal and was credited with downing five Japanese Zeros. The memory of Stanley Clifford Low is honored in the War Memorial at St. Mary's Square in San Francisco, dedicated to the Chinese American service men who made the supreme sacrifice in World Wars I and II.

Kim Seung left Kalispell in 1910 to stay with his sister in Salem, Oregon. He became one of the first Chinese Americans to graduate from UC Berkeley with an engineering degree in 1917. While at UC Berkeley, Kim was president of the Chinese Student's Club, following in the footsteps of his friend Sun Foo, the son of Dr. Sun Yat-Sen. Kim became the first Chinese American Chief Engineer in the United States. Kim Seung was a scholar and spokesman for the Chinese community who was intensely proud of his Chinese heritage. He married and had five children. Daughter Arabella studied operatic singing at Juilliard and earned praise and fame as Helen Chiao in the original Broadway production of *The Flower Drum Song*



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Stanley and Loren, 1943.



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Kim Seung Hong.

in 1958. Her enchanting performance of the song "Love Look Away" has inspired generations of music lovers and was a favorite of my father Loren.

Chun Ngou stayed with her mother after the earthquake until she married in 1910 when she was 16 years old. From her mother she learned the sewing skills Tom Ying had acquired at the Cameron House. Chung Ngo and her mother had a seamstress business making work clothing for the Chinese men. She later opened a tailor shop called Ngai Sing on 9th Street in Oakland and passed the tradition of sewing on to her three daughters. She was the only one of Hung Lai Woh's children to return to China, making a trip in 1920.

Ed Toon moved to New York where he married Ruth Sennett in 1922 with whom he had a daughter. Ed Toon was a dapper and impeccably well dressed man. He later returned to California to work as a chef with his brother Bing.

Bing Quong stayed in Montana and learned to cook at a Chinese restaurant in Whitefish. As a young boy he road the trains around the West by climbing onto the caboose and hanging on to the smoke stack! Continuing the tradition of his father he worked on the railroad where his job was a chef. Bing was a fabulous chef and baker who worked at resorts and at the Duck In Restaurant in Stockton, California. Although he never married, Bing was the kind uncle who was much beloved by all.

At last count Hung Lai Woh and Tom Ying have over 100 descendants, including their 6 children, 21 grandchildren, 34 great-grandchildren, 43 great great-grandchildren, and in the newest generation 12 great, great, great-grandchildren. Amongst these descendants are productive Americans, who contribute to our country in many different occupations. There are physicians, engineers, war heroes, teachers, nurses, Eagle Scouts, an opera singer, professional dancer, a state champion athlete, authors, radio show host, psychologist, neuroscientist, and a female F15 fighter pilot.

The legacy of Hung Lai Woh is found in the productive lives of these descendents. Each of us can trace our past back 150 years to a teenage Chinese boy and a very young slave girl rescued by missionaries. Their story of triumph over hardship and exploitation is not only a Chinese American story; it is truly an American story.



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Hong Family, February 2004.