

# Reminders of Bigotry Unearthed

Remains found at an MTA excavation site shed light on a time rife with anti-Chinese bias.

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They could not marry, they could not own property, and they performed the most undesirable jobs: ditch diggers, canal builders, house boys. They were banned from most shops and public institutions and were the target of racist violence that went unpunished.

Los Angeles was home to an estimated 10,000 Chinese in the late 19th century — almost all men who came to America to work on the railroads and ended up in desperate straits, crowded into a filthy Chinese ghetto near what is now Union Station.

A recent discovery by a new generation of railway workers building the extension of the Gold Line commuter rail line through Boyle Heights has unearthed this dark but largely forgotten period in Los Angeles history.

Last summer, workers found the skeletal remains of 108 people just outside the Evergreen Cemetery, one of the city's oldest and grandest burial sites.

A few weeks ago, the MTA told a community review board, which includes members of the Chinese Historical Society of Southern California, that the agency's archeological study found that the majority of the remains were from people of Asian descent.

Three-quarters of the remains were adults and most were male. The finding supports the belief among Chinese American historians that the bones belonged to Chinese male sojourners who died a century ago at a time when immigration laws sought to reduce the Chinese population by prohibiting Chinese women from entering the country.

The workers also found rice bowls, jade bracelets, Chinese burial bricks, Asian coins and opium pipes.

Historians have long believed that there was a potter's field for Chinese workers in Boyle Heights but did not know precisely where. The last known public record of the cemetery was from the 1920s.

The discovery has generated excitement within the Chinese American community along with concern about the way the MTA has handled the find.

Irvin Lai, one of the historical society's longest-serving members, said the remains belonged to men who lived at a time when Chinese were relegated to the lowest rung of society.

"They treated the Chinese just as bad when they were dead. They were treated like animals," said Lai, 78, who grew up in the pre-civil rights era and said the memory of being denied service at

barbershops or restaurants because of his ethnicity still stings.

In the late 19th century, racial intolerance toward the Chinese was particularly heightened because some whites believed the Chinese were taking jobs away from them.

Most of the Chinese did not speak English. Politicians and newspapers seized on the anti-Chinese sentiments. The Los Angeles Times described denizens of the Chinese ghetto as "Celestials" and as the "the pig-tainted fraternity."

"While the China man is a natural-born thief and scoundrel, he is also the most superstitious of God's creatures," a Times reporter wrote in a breathless 1887 travelogue of the ghetto.

Members of the historical society say they believe the excavation site is part of a Chinese cemetery that disappeared sometime after the 1920s, when development obscured most of the graves' whereabouts. It dates from 1877, when the owners of the nearby Evergreen Cemetery gave the city five acres in which to bury indigents.

Chinese were not permitted to be buried in Evergreen Cemetery, where some of the city's most prominent early families — such as the Van Nuyses, Lankershims, Hollenbecks and Workmans — were laid to rest. Chinese were given a corner of the city potter's field next to the indigents.

But unlike the white indigents, who were buried at no charge, the Chinese had to pay \$10 for a burial, a substantial fee for that era, Lai said.

Lai said he found what could be the last official acknowledgment of the Chinese cemetery at the Los Angeles County Hall of Records.

The document, dated June 19, 1923, is from the superintendent of the county Department of Charities, Norman R. Martin, to the secretary of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, Chan Kai Sing.

Martin wrote that the potter's field where the Chinese were buried was badly crowded.

"Recently your people established a new Chinese cemetery on East 1st Street, and it would be highly desirable if the bodies buried in the county cemetery could be transferred to your new location," he said.

Martin said he wanted the chamber to move the remains and offered compensation of \$2 per body even after acknowledging that each grave cost the Chinese \$10. "The idea being that you would move all of the bodies as fast as practicable," Martin wrote.

The letter said there were 902 Chinese buried in the vicinity of what is now the MTA excavation site, at Lorena and 1st streets.

Lai found a list of some of the dead buried at the old Chinese cemetery. In cursive writing were hundreds of Chinese names, such as Wong Wah Mow, who at 46, was killed after he was "shot

in heart" in a homicide. Tom Ping, 51, died from opium poisoning. Wah Lee, 51, committed suicide by hanging.

While historians said they hope the find will broaden their understanding of the sojourners' lives, some expressed anger at the way they learned about it.

The historical society and other Chinese American community leaders have accused the MTA of concealing the fact that the bones were of Chinese immigrants for months so that it would not delay the extension of the Gold Line, a long-anticipated \$898-million project that will connect Union Station to East L.A.

"It's a slap in the face," said Ken Chan, president of the historical society. "These men weren't respected when they were buried, and it's like they're not being respected now."

The MTA denies that it held back information. Once it found the bones, officials said they shipped them to an archeologist for study.

They said they found no reason to halt construction after all the remains and artifacts had been removed. Once the archeology firm concluded the bones could be Chinese, they said they immediately informed the historical society.

MTA officials said that if they had known earlier they were dealing with a predominantly Chinese grave site, they would have contacted members of the Chinese community, such as the historical society, and asked for their help.

"Everything would have been directed differently if we knew we were dealing with a preponderance of Chinese remains" earlier, said Carl Ripaldi, the MTA project's environmental specialist. "We realize the sensitivity of the issues here. We have to be very sensitive to all people, all cultures and customs."

In recent weeks, the historical society has been helping with the identification of some artifacts. It is unlikely it will find relatives in the U.S. today because of the prohibition of Chinese women during that era.

"These guys probably had a friend or two bury them," Lai said. "They probably threw wine over the grave, burned some incense and paper money, and if they were lucky, had a eulogy read with some kind words."

Lai wants the MTA to re-inter the bodies at Evergreen Cemetery — the place where at the time of their death they were not allowed to enter let alone be buried. That decision will ultimately be up to the MTA and the community review board, which includes Lai and Boyle Heights residents.

Lai said: "We need to give them a dignified burial with elected officials" present.