GOLD MOUNTAIN

In 1849, word reached Hong Kong of a fabulous gold strike in the United States -- specifically, in the Sierra Nevada foothills of California. Such excited talk soon made its way northwest to the bustling city of Canton. By the following year, many dreamed of crossing the Great Ocean to America, and find wealth in *gam saan*, Cantonese for "Gold Mountain."

Southern China at this time was suffering from the early stages of the Taiping Rebellion. The vast majority of the poor could not pay the crushing taxes which the Qing Dynasty had increased to help fight the civil uprising. Drought had brought famine too, at this, the worst possible time. And when the needed rains finally came, they caused deadly flooding. It was as if a curse was upon the land, and many men grew desperate to save their families.

One such man was Wu Chen, a Han Chinese and rice farmer from the countryside surrounding Canton. He was now age nineteen, and like most full-grown men here, Wu weighed 120 pounds and stood 4'10'' tall. He had married Li Ying three years earlier, and she produced two daughters and a son in quick succession. Like most others, Wu's family scraped by, and through good *joss* (luck) so far, none of the young children -- though not exactly robust -- had died. But the situation of the Chens was increasingly dire. The scant money they had saved was running out. Wu's parents lived with them, as did Li's mother. Li's father had died of typhus shortly after Li had married.

When Wu heard about *gam saan*, he was thrilled and immediately interested. After discussing his plan with his extended family, he begged a ride on a coal barge and went the eighty miles downstream from Canton to Hong Kong. He discovered that the Pacific Mail Steamship Company was making regular sailings via Honolulu to San Francisco. Using his *pidgin* (business) English, which all Cantonese relied upon, he learned that the journey typically took one month and cost $47 in American money -- $60 if meals were included. This cheapest fare entitled one to a small hammock swinging in the fetid, stifling lower deck of the ship, crammed with eighty other Chinamen with the same idea of getting rich on California gold.

"You go, you pay silver taels and copper cash, you *sabbee* (understand)?" the overworked ticket clerk explained at the harbor's ship office. "Paper money no good. You no go with China paper money." The clerk then showed Wu Chen a calendar, indicating to him today's date and then the date of the next Pacific Mail steamship departure. "Ship go *chop chop* (quickly) that day, ten sunrises you come back this place. You sabbee?"

"Me sabbee, Boss man," Chen replied.

Wu begged several rides back to Canton on carts or wagons pulled by pairs of black water buffaloes. Two nights later, he was home. He explained the situation in precise detail.

All saved money was assembled and carefully counted. After selling three pigs, six chickens, and two roosters, the extended Chen family had the equivalent in silver and copper coins of $173 in Yankee dollars. It was decided that Wu would take $83 of that amount, which would leave him with $23 after paying for his steamboat passage and board. The other seven family members would have to live on the remaining $90 in taels and coin cash until Wu sent most of the money he hoped to begin earning in America back home. "I may be gone for a year, or for many years," he confessed. "But I will try to make us rich, and bring honor to our family name and to our beloved ancestors." Before he left, Wu tenderly reassured his wife and embraced his three children. Li Ying would later try to explain to their son and daughters why their father had to go away, but she reassured them that he would be back eventually.

On May 8, 1850, Wu and seventy-nine other wary Cantonese men boarded the 1250-ton Pacific Mail Steamship SS Oregon. None had ever been on a large ship before, and hence had never sailed the ocean. The little money each had had been converted into American dollars and coins. The captain, Rafer Townsend -- a towering redhead sporting matching florid muttonchops, and sweating in the port's humidity -- ordered the anchors raised, and soon the Oregon trailed thick black smoke as she briskly steamed out of busy Hong Kong harbor.

As Wu Chen was quickly led past the first-class private cabins of wealthy merchants and their wives returning home to San Francisco and beyond, he had a glimpse at their fine clothes, big noses on pink faces, and their leather shoes as he was shunted with the other Chinamen to the stairwell leading below decks to steerage. Once there, he grabbed the first empty hammock he saw in the dim light and reserved it with his modest surplus clothing bundle. Soon a fellow Han named Bao Ling introduced himself as he claimed an adjoining hammock.

Bao was also a simple rice farmer, from a village several miles away from Wu's home. He was the same size as Wu, but was two years older. Bao's wife's name was Ru Shi, and they had twin sons. Like Chen -- and all other Chinese males -- Ling had shaved the high front of his head, and had grown the back of his hair into a waist-long, braided queue. This tradition had begun under the Manchu Dynasty, and had continued under the current Qing Dynasty. It was a sign of fealty to the 7th Qing Emperor, Xianfeng. If one was ever caught without a queue, the hapless man was arrested and publicly beheaded. And if a man ever left Chinese soil and had his queue cut off for whatever reason, that man was forbidden to re-enter China until it had grown back. The pair soon became friends and confidants. They agreed to stay together once they reached Gold Mountain and sought their fortunes.

The Pacific voyage to Honolulu was unfortunately dreadful. For two weeks, the SS Oregon battled high winds and waves which were the remnants of a typhoon off the South China Sea. Before long, the dank steerage deck was awash with spilled buckets of urine, vomit, and feces. Being confined below, the eighty Chinese were dismayed at their inability to wash their bodies every day, as was their habit. Meanwhile, the food was likewise awful -- poorly cooked rice, vegetables which soon went bad, heavily salted fish, and hard, wood-like ship's biscuits. Chopsticks were put to precision work, picking out the odd weevil or other pests in the meal bowls. Every Han spoke longingly of devouring roast pork, chicken, or duck! Weak, tepid tea was offered to quench one's thirst.

In talking with the other Chinamen, Wu and Bao learned that once upon arrival in San Francisco, they should proceed to that growing city's Chinatown neighborhood, both for safety and for updated information regarding the best gold fields. "Go see Lee Fang," one older man -- with a few long gray hairs sprouting from his chin -- suggested. "I heard rumors that he is honest and helpful."

Arriving in Honolulu, the Han were allowed to come up on deck for fresh air and exercise, but they were forbidden to disembark by Customs law. Instead, they dowsed each other with buckets of seawater by way of bathing, once some of the first-class passengers had gotten off and before new ones boarded. The weather had since calmed, and Wu could smell the sunny fragrance of tropical flowers and coconut palm trees gently wafting from the island of Oahu. Fresh fruit was soon brought aboard, so for the final two-week leg of their journey, the Chinese could enjoy their first pineapples, mangos, guavas, and bananas.

The SS Oregon arrived just one day late in San Francisco harbor. It was now the 9th of June. The Han referred to San Francisco as *Tai Fau*, "the big city." The chaotic harbor was a clogged forest of tall ship masts. Captain Townsend professionally maneuvered, then moored his steamship in its designated birth near the ferry terminal. Soon, the eighty Chinamen -- each wearing their traditional reed-woven, conical hats -- were permitted on land by the gruff, impatient authorities.

But the assorted young toughs, rowdy jobless men, and gaudily painted whores hanging about the docks taunted the Han men as they disembarked, calling them yellow devils, dumb coolies, slant-eyed lepers, stupid monkeys, or half-men. The crowd mocked the Chinamen's queues and tried to grab their long braids as the Hans hustled past in fear and dismay. This would be the first taste of many of the unfair discrimination and cruel prejudice that awaited the Chinese in Gold Mountain. The two friends separated themselves from the mostly confused, larger Han immigrant group.

Using their crude pidgin English, Wu and Bao asked various passersby how to get to Chinatown. They were rudely ignored or even cursed at until a kindly older woman took the time to patiently walk them to that part of the city, which was not too far from the docks. Once there -- much to their relief -- Cantonese was spoken again, so the pair asked for the whereabouts of Lee Fang. He was found in a modest but tidy small office of something called the Chinese Assistance Committee. Wu was shocked to see that Lee no longer had a queue, and had stopped shaving the top of his forehead. The man resembled a Westerner in both hair style and clothing. But Wu kept his peace and said nothing.

After introductions were made and hot tea was offered, Fang explained the latest situation regarding the gold fields. Lee, age 23, was from Hong Kong, and had been in America for five years. He had learned English well, and worked with the blessings -- and basic financial support -- of certain segments of San Francisco's religious community. [In 1850, just over 7000 Chinese would arrive here. But by the following year, over 25,000 Chinese would have come to California.]

"Regretfully, my friends, the best areas for gold panning in the foothills are either already claimed or are exhausted and abandoned. You and everyone else coming here are too late. But I can set you up with a place to stay until I can find you both jobs as houseboys. You would basically be servants in good Caucasian homes, working for $3 a week, with your own room and your meals provided. Celestials [China was known as the Celestial Kingdom] are allowed to do this kind of work in California -- cooking, laundry, errands, cleaning. It is safe and regular. Fishing and farming are also acceptable jobs for the Chinese in America," Fang declared.

He continued. "Later, I can help you send some of your money home to your families, or you can save it all up and carefully guard it until you return to China in two or three years," Lee suggested. He then wrote in English on a piece of paper and gave it to Wu. "Address your letter exactly like this: 'Lee Fang, C.A.C., San Francisco' and I will get it. Inside your letter, you can write in Cantonese, but if you use Chinese characters on the outside address, it will be thrown away."

Wu and Bao went aside for a quick discussion as other Han men that they recognized from the SS Oregon drifted in, similarly looking for aid. The pair ultimately decided to try their luck in finding gold in the Sierra Nevada. They thanked Fang for his help, and he wished them good luck. "Again, you can always safely send me any letters or money that you wish to be relayed to your families. I have Christian missionaries that leave fairly regularly for Hong Kong, and they will guarantee that your wives will receive your offerings," Lee advised.

The pair went next to a street food vendor and purchased nourishing bowls of boiled cabbage with bean sprouts, a few bits of pork, and a square of tofu, for ten cents each. Next, they found and entered a Shinto temple, tipped the priest, lit joss sticks, and gave thanks to the gods for their safe journey so far. Afterwards, they found a twenty-five cent bath house (with an adjoining room of sleeping mats) for a warm soak and a welcomed night's rest minus the nauseous, rocking motion of a ship at sea. From Zhou, the bath house owner, they learned where to go to catch a boat up the Sacramento River to *Yi Fau*, ("the second city") which was Sacramento. Once there, they would buy a pick, a shovel, a cooking pot, two bowls, and a tin gold pan, then proceed to the gold fields forty miles further east in Coloma.

The following dawn in the Bay was cool and foggy. After a cheap breakfast of rice with fried egg and hot tea, the friends went back to the docks and took a crowded paddle-wheeler up the river delta to Sacramento. For their one dollar fare each, Wu and Bao silently endured the gruff pushing, bemused stares, shoving, and mocking insults of the boisterous Caucasian male passengers during most of the long voyage. They arrived close to sunset, then found a place to sleep in the tall weed growth near the banks where the American River merged with the Sacramento River. As experienced rice farmers -- noting the ideal position of this new area -- both men instinctively knew that this rich, silted land with its abundant, adjacent water would be perfect for rice growing.

After purchasing the next day -- at outlandish prices -- their needed equipment and a one-month supply of food, the pair hiked east past Folsom Lake, then followed a rude footpath beside the icy-cold South Fork of the American River until they reached Coloma two days later. It was here by John Sutter's sawmill that James Marshall found the first gold nugget in the river on January 24, 1848. His remarkable and surprise discovery started the California Gold Rush. Coloma -- population 588 -- was in a river valley surrounded by high foothills, and the land was plentiful with forests of Valley Oak trees and pines.

Although this area was virtually played out by now, it was still swarming with hopeful miners looking for pay dirt. Without being noticed too much, the Chinamen keenly observed how gold panning was done. But seeing no free riverbank areas to set up their camp spot, Bao and Wu were forced to keep travelling up river. This went on in frustration for two days. The poor Han friends were yelled at, kicked as they walked quickly by, threatened with beatings, and cursed: "Keep going, you yellow bastards! No Chinamen allowed! Don't stop here, you slant-eyed midgets!" Wu was glad that he had brought a knife from China with him, should they ever be attacked and have to defend themselves. But they made it safely through any danger.

Bao Ling began to get discouraged by now, and brought up the suggestion that they go back to *Tai Fau*. "At least there we will have steady work for money, and a warm place to sleep, and regular meals," he argued.

But Wu Chen was undeterred. "We came here to get rich for our families and our ancestors, and I know by the gods that we will be successful," he pledged.

At last they found an area far away from anyone (a place which would later be known as Silver Creek), so they put down their gear, made camp, and set to work. It was hard, brutal labor. They took turns swinging the pick to break the stubborn rock, then shoveled the gravel into the gold pan. Next came standing in the icy river water for hours on end, swirling the dirt and stones until shiny, tiny yellow metal flakes began to appear and accumulate. Sometimes, a pea-sized nugget of gold would be found under an overturned rock. Every month, the men took turns and returned to the assay office in Coloma to convert their findings into dollars and buy more food stuffs. Neither understood the concept of filing a claim for the plot they were working on, so the local official simply gave up in exasperation trying to explain it in either English or pidgin. At that point, such an important legal technicality would have to be overlooked -- at least for the time being, given that the Chinamen's findings were paltry anyway, averaging only about $22 a month. Frankly, nobody would be interested in an official claim unless the Hans made a substantial gold strike.

When the weather grew colder at night in early October, Wu and Bao built themselves a rough lean-to dwelling out of fallen small trees and branches, and collected a store of deadfall firewood for the coming winter. Once, they spotted a brown bear approaching, looking for food before it went into hibernation. They chased it away by throwing rocks and making loud noises. The men sent back their first letters home via the mail service in Coloma to Lee Fang in San Francisco, along with $35 each in American dollars. Still, the money they had earned in four months was actually four times what they would have earned had they remained in China. With the change in the weather, warm blankets, boots, and canned foods also had to be purchased in Coloma. Both men suddenly realized that neither had ever experienced snow before, but they had been warned in town that it would be coming soon. Of course, they talked about missing their wives and children in the evenings each night before going to sleep, both men very tired.

By November, it grew so cold that the river edges began to freeze. And it snowed -- hard. Staying here outdoors and working could not continue under these circumstances, the two Chinamen concluded. They needed to hunker down in a town until warmer weather returned in the Spring. After much debate, they broke camp and returned together to Coloma.

But after a two-day walk, the Hans were not welcomed to stay there over the winter. "No more room!" they were dismissed in Coloma. "No dogs, and no Chinese!" "I hit you if you no go away, chop chop, sabbee?" However, one lone, sympathetic, white-bearded old-timer suggested in pidgin that the pair go instead to Hangtown, about ten miles south, and try for room and board there -- and maybe find work there, too, in a restaurant or laundry.

Having no alternative, Wu and Bao trudged through a snowy, twisting, wooded trail with their gear for several hours and finally arrived in Hangtown in the early evening's gloom. At the far edge of town, they noticed a sign in both Cantonese and English offering laundry services. They headed over and soon stepped inside the store. A wooden shingle declared that Wang Fat was the owner. Boiling water in the large laundry vats filled the two rooms of the establishment with their steam, making them nicely warm. Three young male Celestials were busy at the vats, stirring dirty clothes in the soapy water with wooden paddles, and conversing loudly as they worked. They suddenly turned and stopped, and called for their boss to come quick.

The freezing and exhausted Hans were welcomed and offered hot tea and bean cakes by the proprietor. They began to gratefully relax and proceeded to tell Wang their story.

"Ah yes, like both of you I came looking for Gold Mountain. I came from Guilin last year and went searching for gold nuggets in Coloma. But the gold was already gone, or nearly, as you are finding out now. In Hangtown, I learned that everybody needs a place to eat and drink, a place to sleep, a place to gamble, a place to bathe, a place to get their clothes clean, and a place that offers whores. So I set up a laundry because nobody else had done so yet, and I have had good joss ever since," Fat explained. "There is a saying: If you really want to get rich, you must learn to 'mine' the miners!" he laughed. "They will always pay you well for all the services they want and need."

Seeing as Wu and Bao confessed that they would only be staying in Hangtown until the weather warmed again, Wang still agreed to put them to work. "You can sleep on the floor here, and I will provide your meals and fifty cents each per day in wages. This deal is equal to earning about a dollar a day, which is fair. Come, let me introduce you to my other workers. They will show you what to do tomorrow, seeing as we are almost closing for the day."

Bao Ling and Wu Chen were happy working for Wang Fat until early April. Over the months, they had enjoyed conversing with their employer and their three coworkers at mealtimes. During off-duty hours, they often played the card game fan-tan together. In February, they had also celebrated the Chinese New Year -- Year of the Pig. The pair continued to send letters and what money they could spare every month to their wives. When Wu asked one day where all the Chinese women were in Gold Mountain (for neither he nor Bao had seen any yet) Wang said, "There are some, but they were purchased exclusively for a lifetime as whores by brothel contractors in China for $300 in American money. They are sex slaves who never marry. But good Chinese wives and other women wait patiently at home for their productive, hard-working, overseas husbands/fathers/brothers/uncles/sons to send them money. Or they wait until their men return to China. Or even sometimes -- if the men are very lucky and earn enough -- the whole family gets to come to America to live."

Two and a half days after they thanked Wang Fat and said good-bye to their co-workers, Wu and Bao were back at their digging site at Silver Creek. For the rest of the month and into June they labored, then moved a bit further east up the river to set up camp and try a fresh area. The South Fork was frigid and moving swiftly from the snow melt in the Sierras.

It was in late July that Bao made an astonishing discovery under an over-turned rock: an irregular-shaped gold nugget about the size of a sparrow's egg. "I'm thinking maybe $300 or $400 for this!" Wu said excitedly, upon gleeful further examination.

When August arrived, it was Bao's turn to take the monthly gold finds pouch and money-to-China letters to Coloma, and return with food supplies and the surplus of American dollars earned. But Wu became very worried when Bao failed to return after the usual four days. Finally, after a week, he went to Coloma to investigate.

From the usual clerk, Leonard, at the assay office, Wu learned that his friend, Bao Ling, had been robbed and then murdered, according to the latest town news from the sheriff's report. The poor Han's naked, stabbed body had been dumped in a ravine and had been partly covered in dirt and oak leaves when it was discovered five days ago. The corpse had been rudely buried in an unmarked grave in the town's cemetery. Nobody really cared very much because it was just some dumb, unlucky Chinaman.

Trembling from the shocking news, Wu cared little about their stolen gold and went directly to the cemetery. He quickly found Bao's grave because it was the only one that had been freshly dug. Wu spied a small, discarded piece of lumber, so taking his knife, he carefully carved the name *Bao Ling* in Chinese characters on the board and pushed it into the ground at the head of the grave. He then said a prayer for his friend's spirit, assured that his ancestors had welcomed him in heaven.

At the Coloma mail office, Wu Chen wrote a long letter to Ru Shi, explaining the calamity that had befallen her husband. He carefully included a substantial amount of dollars, for he knew she and her twins would desperately need it. Then he did the same for Li Ying, his own wife. How he missed her caresses and those of their three children! May the gods watch over and protect them!

But the postal clerk interrupted Wu's thoughts by announcing in pidgin that -- beginning next month -- all Chinese miners had to pay a government-mandated 'foreign miner's tax' of $3 per month. "You bringee money next come, you sabbee?"

Wu had to decide what to do next. He was all alone now, in what was still a strange world. He purchased a few food stuffs, then returned to his river camp to think.

He realized that whatever gold dust he found would be minus $3 in his earnings every month from now on -- just because he was Chinese and could do nothing about it in terms of protest. Was it worth it to stay and continue, or leave and try something else?

Then he remembered the fine potential rice lands back near Sacramento. This skilled job he knew very well! Wu Chen realized at that moment that his destiny had changed. Two days later, he was back in the 'second city,' *Yi Fau*.

Wu scouted out four possible rice areas on farms west of the city currently growing wheat, and --in halting pidgin -- patiently explained his idea. Three of the farmers angrily chased him off, but a fourth, Bill Stover, was intrigued. He was originally from Arkansas, and so was roughly familiar with how rice was grown.

"I have three acres out of one hundred and eighty which are not producing very much, Wu Chen." Stover drew a picture in the dirt with his finger, spoke slowly, and gestured with his hands and fingers. "They are on a sloping hill, but there is some flat area too. Maybe the soil is too poor there. Let's see if you can really perform your miracle. I'll order the rice seed from San Francisco. It'll come all the way from your homeland. While we wait, you can join my wheat crew before you build your rice terraces and paddies and irrigate them. I'll give you room and board, and I'll pay you a dollar a day. When the rice comes to harvest, you can have 25% of the profit, minus the initial cost of the seed. If things don't pan out after two seasons, we'll call it quits. Agreed? I mean, you sabbee?"

"Me sabbee big yes, Boss man!" Wu grinned excitedly. "I work good good for you me same!"

Bill took Chen out in his wagon to the land parcel in question for a "look see." Wu carefully examined the soil, even tasting a pinch of it. Some clay, but that would yield to water in the 112 days it would take the rice to go from seed to plant to harvest. The parcel was about a half mile from the river, so either an irrigation ditch could be dug, or barrels of waters could be regularly brought by wagon during the dry season. Two or even three crops per year were possible if the weather was favorable, Wu happily realized.

"Can do, Boss man," Chen decreed.

"Please, Wu, call me Bill, you sabbee?" Stover requested. "In America, we can be friends even if I am your boss. I will shake your hand now. It is a nice custom." He offered his hand to the Han.

"Me sabbee, Bill," Chen shyly agreed. His small but strong hand was engulfed by Stover's large paw as they shook, the farm owner's six foot frame towering over his tiny newest worker. The date was September 5, 1852.

For the next six years, Wu Chen worked hard, and was rewarded with productive rice crops. The Sacramento Valley was favored with an ideal agricultural climate of 300 days of sunshine per year. Wu saved his daily dollar wages, and his annual 25% share of the rice proceeds, which averaged close to $375. The rice was sold in Sacramento to the growing Chinese community there, particularly to newly opened Chinese restaurants down near the waterfront. (In one eatery in 1855, Wu learned from other Hans that a new state law had been passed, forbidding Chinese, Indians, and Negroes from ever testifying in court -- still more evidence of discrimination.) Every month, Chen drove a wagon three miles into the city to post a letter with money to his family via Lee Fang. Every few months during this time, he had happily begun receiving letters back from his wife in China, addressed in English -- as directed by Wu -- to Bill Stover's farm. Both she and their three children were doing well, Li reported, much to Wu's relief. (Although Li Ying was illiterate, her husband's father read aloud -- and then helped compose responses to -- Chen's letters.) With Bill Stover's assistance, Wu also opened a simple bank account at Wells Fargo in the city, for the safety and security of his growing savings.

But tragedy struck without warning in October, 1858, when Bill Stover, age 46, dropped dead alone out in one of his harvested wheat fields. A doctor later said that he had suffered a fatal heart attack. A very saddened Wu attended the funeral and burial in Sacramento.

The following month, the Chinaman was doubly-shocked to learn that Bill's widow, Neena, decided to sell the farm and move back to Arkansas. The new owner arrived three weeks later. His name was Jim Colton, from east Texas. He assembled all the workers for an announcement. "Men, everything will stay the same here as before. Your jobs are secure." It was then that he noticed the diminutive Wu Chen, and asked him what he did on the farm. In the halting but understood English that he had slowly learned over the years, the Han explained to the new owner his position -- eager to please his new boss while shyly smiling.

Colton, however, frowned in a dismissive way, then shook his head. "No...I'll not have any Orientals on my land. Never liked them. Hell, they ain't even Christian. You say you grow those three acres of rice fields? I've seen Mexicans do that job just as good in Texas. I'll bring them in instead. I'll pay you until the end of the week, Chinaman, then I want you out and gone," he declared with cruel finality. The other workers silently looked down at their boots, realizing the unfairness, and knowing that they would really miss Wu -- a steadfast coworker and friend who never complained, worked hard, was resourceful, helpful, and honest. Then Colton looked at his pocket watch and abruptly dismissed the assembly.

A dismayed Wu Chen wandered aimlessly around Sacramento, in chilly and damp December weather, trying to decide what to do. Should he return to China? Would he recognize his three growing children, and would they recognize their father again? He had sent about 90% of his total earnings home to his family over the last eight years, and currently had $427.16 in his Wells Fargo bank account. If he went back, that money would not last his family and relatives for more than a few years. The promise of Gold Mountain was once again eluding him.

But his joss was somehow still alive. In January, 1859, word of a huge silver strike in Virginia City, in the Utah Territory (later partly forming a state to be named Nevada), erupted on the streets and in the saloons of Sacramento. Unlike gold placer mining in flowing river beds in California, silver was totally mined underground. The news naturally hit the Chinese restaurants where Wu got his meals. He quickly decided to not miss being one of the first lucky thousand or so to strike it rich. Taking $50 out of his bank account -- after informing his wife by letter of his plans, and telling her not to write back for while -- Chen took the first overcrowded and overpriced stagecoach via Hangtown (renamed 'Placerville' some five years earlier), then over the lofty Sierra Nevada summits to Lake Tahoe (Wu was awed by its magnificent alpine beauty), down to Fuller's Crossing (later to become Reno) at the Truckee River, and finally to Virginia City.

Located in forlorn and rocky desert hills, Wu was alarmed by the area's sharp contrast from any geography he had experienced thus far. No greenery, no shade, no singing birds, no rivers. Departing the dusty stagecoach, Chen soon discovered that Virginia City was a chaos -- its crowds frantic, rude, and money-mad. The silver strike here was dubbed the Comstock Lode, named after Canadian miner and founder Henry Comstock.

With no small relief, Wu spied several of his fellow Chinamen in the milling throngs, and hurried over to join them. After welcomed introductions (they were also Hans from southern China), they informed Chen that there was plenty of work here, but only in the mines which were already owned and run by large business interests from San Francisco and back East. An individual silver fortune was not to be found simply lying on near ground for the taking, as had been California gold.

The Han group took Wu to the mine they all presently worked in, the Bullion. The hiring and payroll manager was Clay Davidson. In his office, Clay asked this newest Celestial in pidgin if he had ever worked underground before.

"No, sir," Wu answered in correct English. "But I have worked hard in the gold fields. I learn new skills quickly. I am honest, careful, and dependable." The other Hans hanging around the office doorway, eavesdropping, were amazed that Chen didn't have to rely on pidgin anymore.

Davidson was impressed. "Well, Wu Chen, I do believe we can use you. The standard pay is a dollar a day. The company includes your meals, and provides basic lodging in a nearby bunkhouse with your friends here. You will work with the other Chinese loading the silver ore cars underground for twelve hours a day. Sunday is your day of rest." Pulling out a contract from a desk drawer, Clay dated it, then had Wu formally make his mark. "Welcome to the Bullion Mine," Davidson added. "Pay day is the last work day of every month."

Working 200-feet underground was a new experience for Chen. Candles and lanterns provided the necessary illumination. Using shovels and hands to collect the broken chunks of rock, the Chinamen loaded ore cars which rested on small rail tracks. Once filled, the ore cars were hauled back to the surface using mules. The job was monotonous, but at least it was better than hard-swinging a sledgehammer or a pick ax all day. The Hans could talk while they worked, which helped the time go by. The Mine was cool in the hot summer, but not too cold in the bitter winter. The meals were adequate, but not really to Asian tastes -- bread, boiled beef, potatoes, beans, and coffee. The Chinamen pooled some of their pay to purchase their own tea and vegetables in town when such luxuries became available. The sleeping quarters were likewise simple but livable. The Celestials built themselves a kind of bath house out of discarded lumber, and were able to gladly clean themselves regularly, if not daily, with warm water and soap. (The Caucasian workers rarely bathed -- perhaps once or twice a year.) The non-mixing of the races led to relative peace both on the job and off. The chief exception was on Sundays, when the whites went crazy with whiskey, and looked for fights with anyone. Some of the Hans, meanwhile, took their Sunday relaxation in the form of a visit to one of many of Virginia City's opium dens, to dream in a mellow drug daze of their wives and children back in China. But Wu Chen spent his free time writing letters and sending money home instead. Virginia City had fairly regular postal service by now, so Wu could receive letters back again, addressed in English to: Wu Chen, Bullion Mine, Virginia City.

This life of underground mining went on for four years. The American Civil War had come in 1861, but had little effect on the fortunes being extracted from the earth for the lucky mine owners. Discussions about the war -- and even some heated arguments about North vs. South -- flared up among the workers, but the Chinese had no side to choose, and so they were ignored. (That same year, Wu learned that Emperor Xianfeng had died, and had been succeeded by the new, 8th Qing Emperor, Tongzhi.)

One Sunday, Wu Chen was walking for leisure down the street and past the office of Virginia City's major newspaper -- The Territorial Enterprise -- when he was accidently bumped by an apologetic young reporter hurrying out the door, probably going for an important interview somewhere in town. The man was Samuel L. Clemens, who would one day be known around the world for his writings by another name: Mark Twain. But, of course, Wu would be unaware of that.

One new skill that Chen used in the mines was detonating gunpowder to dislodge large areas of stubborn, worthless rock to get at the silver ore veins. The Chinese had invented gunpowder centuries earlier, and Wu had used it on occasion at his farm near Canton to blast out tree stumps so as to free up more land to grow rice. In 1862, when Clay Davidson learned about Wu's knowledge and experience with explosives, he raised Chen's salary to $1.50 per day, and put him to work on the blasting crew. Soon, he was carefully working with -- and even directing, on occasion -- specialized Caucasian workers in that delicate but dangerous art.

In January, 1863, exciting news came to town: a Transcontinental Railroad would be built, linking the U.S. east coast with California. Up to this point, rails had only reached as far west as Omaha, so the plan was to build from that city to Sacramento. It would be a competitive race between two large rail companies: the Central Pacific and the Union Pacific. The U.S. government was offering substantial acres of free land to these two companies on both sides of every mile of track they could lay. The Central Pacific would start in Sacramento and go east, while the Union Pacific would start in Omaha and go west. Somewhere in the middle, the two would meet. This bold transcontinental railroad plan had been formally authorized by President Abraham Lincoln a year earlier, even while the nation still struggled with its Civil War.

Wu Chen was interested in this new challenge and perhaps even a change of fortune, particularly when he learned that hiring for this ambitious project was now happening back in Sacramento. After careful consideration, he wrote a letter to his family informing them of his decision. Next, he sincerely thanked Clay Davidson when he resigned from the Bullion Mine, and bid a sad farewell to his Han friends. Wu took the next stage back to Sacramento the following morning. The date was January 18, 1863. He deposited more of his savings into his Wells Fargo bank account upon his arrival, and took care of his mail.

At the terminus depot of the Central Pacific by the riverfront, Chen was one of the first of twenty-one Chinamen hired by the railroad (a number that would swell to over 18,000 Chinese workers in just a few years). His speaking English fairly well was a plus in his employment. He would soon spend off-hours teaching the other Chinese useful phrases of the new language. ("You say 'fetch' or 'bring,' not 'catchee'...you say 'I cannot,' not 'no can do,'" he carefully and patiently explained. "You say 'I understand,' not 'sabbee.'")

Steam locomotives and other train cars, as well as steel rails and other construction equipment, had to be brought (disassembled, if necessary) by ship from factories near the East coast. These supply ships made the long journey down the Atlantic and around Cape Horn in South America, then up the Pacific to San Francisco Bay. Once there, the necessary equipment was reloaded on steamships and brought up the river delta to Sacramento. It was a massive, long, and costly venture. (Some equipment was also brought overland across the isthmus of Panama.)

The job of all twenty-one Chinamen was to fill in the spaces between the wooden track ties and around the sloping rail bed sides with crushed gravel after the rails were laid. Each man moved twenty-pound buckets of rocks an average of four-hundred times every day for twelve hours, except on Sunday. The pay was $26 a month -- half of what non-Asians were paid. The Chinese had to provide their own food and slept ten-in-a-tent, but the European immigrant workers slept inside special train bunk cars and were provided with three meals a day. Because the Civil War was still raging back East, finding available male workers was difficult, which was why the Chinese were quickly hired -- with the added company advantage of getting to pay the unaware Orientals less. Meanwhile, in Omaha, the Union Pacific were able to hire mostly Irishmen who had fled their impoverished homeland, looking for any kind of work. They had also faced harsh discrimination in many Eastern big cities, where signs saying: "No dogs or Irish allowed" were common sights.

The land east of Sacramento was initially flat, as Wu already knew, then gradually went up in elevation until hitting the daunting, hard granite Sierra Nevada mountains at 7,000' at Donner Pass. As a result, the work was not too challenging at the beginning of the Central Pacific's rail construction. (In 100 miles, elevation went from 40' to 7000'.)

After a raised rail bed of packed earth was prepared, rectangular wooden ties were placed precisely nineteen inches apart. Next, a flatbed train car loaded only with rails was moved forward. The rail gauge was exactly four feet and 8.5 inches apart -- a standard adopted from the British rail system. Ten-man teams (five on each side) would hoist each 21-foot long, 420 lb. steel rail. Two rails were placed parallel every thirty seconds. Ten different men (five again on each side) would then drive ten spikes to secure each rail, using exactly three hammer blows per iron spike (a half-pound each, and 5.5 inches long). Chen and his coworkers would then go to work, filling in the necessary areas with crushed gravel, using their buckets and shovels.

The Chinese crew foreman was a beefy Italian named Enrico Penjanno. He grew to like his rather exotic (to him) Orientals, because they never complained, they were never late to work, and they were not lazy shirkers or given to Sunday drunkenness. They also learned any new skill carefully and quickly. On off-days to relax, the Chinamen played fan-tan or mahjong -- and, if they gambled, it was only for fun and not money. Enrico especially liked Wu Chen, because he could have more detailed conversations in English with him. The Chinese were devotedly clean (taking daily sponge baths), they washed their clothes regularly, and were rarely sick. Instead of drinking water directly out of streams and ditches like the Europeans, the Celestials drank only boiled water in making their tea. Hence, they avoided dysentery and other germ-laden diseases.

When it came to purchasing their own food, the Chinese could now get their preferred Asian specialty items from San Francisco's Chinatown. These were then loaded and delivered by rail to their current work terminus site. Soon, Wu and his friends were regularly enjoying fish, abalone meat, oysters, Asian fruits, bamboo sprouts, mushrooms, and dried seaweed, as well as rice (each man ate a pound a day), salted cabbage, chicken, and (a favorite item) fresh pork. They rotated among themselves the cooking duties. They basically kept to themselves as a group for familiar comfort, preferring not to mix very much with non-Asians.

This latter preference was due to the hostile prejudice against the Chinese by some of the other European immigrant workers. Bloody fights were thankfully avoided, but arguments often got heated. There was a sense expressed by some that Asians were inferior, given their small body size and supposed lack of intelligence because they couldn't speak English well, or without an accent. The Chinese therefore learned to avoid such confrontations as a simple survival skill.

Six months went by, and with it came the full heat of summer. The work was hot and sweaty, their traditional, reed-woven, conical hats offering minimal protection from the burning sun. Wu Chen continued to send a monthly letter with money back to his family in China via Lee Fang. Steady progress had been made laying track. This routine continued for more than two years. By the end of 1865 -- the Civil War having finally ended in April of that year, along with the tragic assassination of President Lincoln mere days later -- the Central Pacific had laid fifty-four miles of track, up to the town of Colfax. The wages of the Chinamen, meanwhile, had been raised $4 a month to $30. By now, there were actually many more Chinese working on the railroad than non-Asians.

In late spring, 1866, after the typically enormous winter snows had largely melted and the muddy ground was beginning to dry out, the railroad reached its first big test: the need for blasting a tunnel through Summit Rock. Although nitroglycerine had since been invented as an explosive, the Central Pacific at this time had a full inventory of black powder, and wanted to use it. (The price of such gunpowder had risen from $2.50 a keg to an outrageous $15 a keg, even though the Civil War and its needs were over.)

When Wu Chen heard about the upcoming plan to use explosives, he approached Enrico and told him of his useful experience working with black powder in the Bullion Mine in Virginia City. "I can help you do the job safely," he offered, "but you should pay me more for the dangers." After conferring with his company bosses, Penjanno agreed, and Wu's salary was raised $4 more per month, to $34.

Because a leveled track area was needed before the tunnel was bored, Wu had his Chinese friends rig up a pulley system of ropes and large baskets which would lower him down the cliff face. Using a hand drill, he carefully pounded holes in the hard granite (needing to change his drill bit every fifteen minutes when it was rendered dull), and returned with black powder and a fuse. Packing in the explosive, he lit the fuse, and then was rapidly pulled up to safety before the gunpowder ignited. BOOM! as lethal rock debris and billowing smoke flew out. This was done repeatedly for several days, and soon other Chinese crews, under Wu's instruction and supervision, were at work blasting the rock away. Ultimately, the Summit Tunnel itself would be blown through -- but often with only inches of progress per day. [The dangers in doing such work should not be underestimated, for over 1000 Chinese were accidently killed in these jobs over the next two difficult years. Sadly, their names were never recorded. The flippant phrase: "Not a Chinaman's chance..." actually originated at this time.]

The "Big Four" executives who ran the Central Pacific were Leland Stanford, Mark Hopkins, Collis P. Huntington, and Charles Crocker. Crocker was the head of construction, and was also the one who first promoted the idea of using Chinese labor to help build the railroad. On June 1st, Crocker came to the work area at the Summit Tunnel for an inspection. He arrived just before sunset in his own deluxe railroad car, accompanied by three newspaper reporters and his usual entourage. Crocker would stay onboard until he enjoyed dinner and had a good night's sleep, before meeting some supervisors (including Enrico) and a few random workers the following morning for a progress report.

Because of the danger of potential gunpowder accidents, a special steel-paneled wagon had been built in Sacramento and sent to the work site a month earlier. Up to thirty powder kegs could be carefully loaded and stored inside this armored rig. But a day prior to Crocker's arrival, the rig had broken an axle going over a sharp rock, and had to be repaired. As a result, the gunpowder needed for the new day's blasting job needed to be transferred, then delivered, to the work site by regular wagon.

After the kegs were loaded, the teamster, who was carefully holding a lit lantern in the now fading twilight (needed to help him check the neck yoke center ring and trace chains by the wagon's wooden tongue before moving), was kicked in his head by his horse when it was startled by the nearby locomotive's sudden loud steam whistle. The lit lantern flew up and away from the driver's hand as he fell, and crashed onto the top of the gunpowder kegs in the wagon bed, breaking, then rapidly spreading flames! The horse bolted in panic, alone, with a now potentially catastrophic fire burning behind him. He stopped in fear and confusion right beside Crocker's train car.

Wu Chen, who was the closest person to the scene, immediately ran toward the burning wagon. He removed his jacket and placed it over the panicked horse's head. Then the Chinaman quickly pulled the horse reins and wagon over to a nearby water tower. As other men noticed what was just happening, and began shouting and yelling, Wu stopped the wagon under the huge water spigot and pulled a lever, causing a cascade of water to gush forth and put out the fire -- with mere moments to spare. Soon, Charles Crocker and others ran over to inspect the dramatic scene.

Wu Chen's quick-thinking and actions had saved the day!

Crocker went up and shook the Chinaman's small hand. After getting Wu's name, Crocker turned to the huge, gathering crowd and said, "This little man just saved my life a few minutes ago. Had he not acted with such bravery and courage, and at the risk of his own life, the gunpowder wagon could have exploded, killing me and several others as we sat in my train car. For his heroic accomplishment, I am going to reward him tomorrow with a bonus of $2000. After all, he saved the company $500 in all that gunpowder, once the kegs dry out. And my hide should be worth the rest," he announced with a good-natured chuckle. So I say, "Let's hear three cheers for Wu Chen!" Charles held his savior's hand up high, beaming.

The workers went wild with applause -- especially Wu's fellow Chinese, who also cheered in Cantonese. The three eyewitness newspaper reporters knew had a terrific story to tell the nation. The famous Chinaman was interviewed and quoted. Chen then had his photograph taken with Crocker, an etching of which even appeared back East in Harper's Weekly. It was the first photograph Wu had ever seen of himself.

After the excitement and publicity died down, Wu Chen decided that he would continue to work for the Central Pacific Railroad only until the first snows, then leave. He realized that he had enough money at last to return to his family in China -- finally victorious after all these sixteen years away! When his last day at work came, he said an emotional goodbye to Enrico Penjanno and his Chinese countrymen. He took the train, free of charge, back to Sacramento.

But, after much consideration, Wu's heart and mind were torn: Should I simply go home now? Or should I bring my whole family here to America to live, rather than face the uncertainty of a future in China? America offered many choices for those who were enterprising and hard-working, even if one was Chinese. True, there was much discrimination and prejudice to overcome. Yet still, there was an unmatched freedom and opportunity here that was completely unheard of back home.

Chen thought and thought deeply about what to do. He checked his bank account at Wells Fargo and deposited the $2000 check that Charles Crocker had awarded him. The bank teller even recognized him and asked to shake his hand!

Wu was surprised at how many Chinese were now in the city. In one of the restaurants, on a whim, he asked about rice-farming jobs in the area -- remembering with pride those happy, peaceful years with Bill Stover.

"You should go to Marysville, about sixty miles north of here, up the Valley. Much rice growing there," the Chinese cook, Tang, suggested.

So Wu went by rented horse and buggy to check the area out. It was late October, 1866. Wu Chen was thirty-five years old now. He remembered being only nineteen, sailing on the SS Oregon. He thought again about his friend, Bao Ling. Such a tragedy...

What he saw all around Marysville impressed him. After talking with two friendly rice-growers, Wu realized that this was truly the destiny he had been searching for all of his life. With half of his money, Chen could buy part-ownership of the large rice acreage of Bohannon Farms (one of the two he visited), owned by a genial, gray-bearded farmer, Tyler Bohannon. The rice paddies were well-maintained and rich.

"You can bring your whole family here to live and to work," Tyler offered. "I have a nice spot for you to build a house too. It will be a good, prosperous life for you and for me. My Mexican workers do a fine job, but they leave for part of the year every year to go back home to their families. That leaves me short-handed. I'm getting up in years and need to slow down a bit, so you came along at the right time, my friend. Let me introduce you to my wife, Myrtle, and we'll get acquainted over lunch."

Later that evening, as the orange sun was setting and flocks of geese flew overhead on their way south, Wu had made up his mind. Taking his knife out of his waist belt, he ceremoniously reached behind his back and cut his long hair queue off. There would be no turning back.

"I will be an American," he declared to the sky and to the gently blowing wind, which was sweet with the smell of rice stubble, ready for the next planting after it would soon be burned off.

The next day, back in Sacramento, he wrote a letter to his family, and included a large amount of money. He then put it in a carefully wrapped small box, along with his coiled, braided queue, and addressed it in care of his reliable friend, Lee Fang.

Wu Chen's words were succinct: I have made our fortune at last. Everyone must come to San Francisco. I will meet you, and take you all to our new home in California...

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

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