

NARRATIVE TEXTS

Chinese Texans

The Chinese, initially arriving in Texas as laborers and facing decades of exclusion laws, were often seen by others as stereotypical Orientals: railroad laborers in unusual dress who ate strange food, set up instant laundries, and associated with peculiar gods. In those times, much of the image was accurate.

The first Chinese, seeking jobs that would allow them to return to China with money, were single men. Most in Texas worked on railroad construction crews. Some 250 Chinese were on the Houston and Texas Central construction in 1870. A few stayed in Robertson County at the end of the railroad work as cotton sharecroppers. Other than a few individuals, these were the only rural Texas Chinese, then or now.

A second group, nearly 3,000 from the West Coast, worked on the Southern Pacific construction as the line moved east from El Paso. Blasting powder and desert heat were not the only perilous aspects of this job. Judge Roy Bean, the “Law West of the Pecos,” ruled at least once that there was “no law against killing a China-man.” After 1883 some workers settled in El Paso County, but by that year further Chinese emigration to the United States was virtually halted. Anti-Chinese sentiment, much originating on the West Coast, created exclusion laws that allowed very few individuals to enter the country.

Only in 1917 was an exception made. U.S. General John J. Pershing had been ordered into Mexico to destroy the forces of Francisco “Pancho” Villa, who had raided into the United States. Pershing’s unsuccessful pursuit was supported by hundreds of Chinese families in northern Mexico. Perhaps hoping to be allowed into the United States, they provided the expeditionary army with food and supplies in an otherwise hostile countryside. More than 500 families followed Pershing out of Mexico and were given special permission by the U.S. government to stay, on provisional terms. Some 400 of these families



Column of Chinese and Mexicans following the Pershing expedition out of Mexico, January 28, 1917



Wedding portrait of Mrs. Mow Wah Chin

NARRATIVE TEXTS

were allowed to settle in San Antonio to become the first Chinese community in the state.

When China became a World War II ally, the feeling in the United States changed to some degree, and the exclusion act was repealed in 1943.

After World War II, northern Chinese, Mandarin speakers and often from well-educated upper-economic classes, came to Texas. Many specialized in medicine, sciences, or engineering. These later arrivals could and did establish the traditional extended families—very patriarchal—and lived together in enough numbers to celebrate Oriental holidays and traditions.

Of more importance, later generations maintained the traditional family and merchant associations. A few organizations based on province of origin were established. All of these supported Chinese families in economic terms. This generation claims very few individuals ever listed on welfare rolls.

Many present-day Chinese Texans are Christian, and many customs have yielded to Western tradition. Still, their Lunar New Year is commonly celebrated, and most people remember that firecrackers (even on the 4th of July) are a popular Chinese contribution to life in the United States.