

The Chinese Come to Iowa

by H. Roger Grant

The vital role played by thousands of Chinese laborers in building the Central Pacific Railroad, which linked the east and west coasts at Promontory, Utah Territory, is commonly known. Yet it is less widely recognized that when the track was officially completed on May 10, 1869, contractors selected an eight-man Chinese crew to place the last section of iron rail, honoring the invaluable contributions made by these people from Asia.

Chinese immigrants solved the critical shortage of workers as the line took shape eastward from its western terminal at the public wharf on the Sacramento River in Sacramento, California. Euro-American laborers found more profitable and less back-breaking work in agriculture and mining and seemed content to allow foreigners to build the Central Pacific. The Chinese willingly assumed the dangerous and difficult tasks of blasting and picking out a right-of-way across the rugged Sierra Nevada Mountains and endured the hardships of pushing track across the vast wastelands of Nevada.

The opening of the Union Pacific-Central Pacific rail artery not only strengthened the nation, but benefited Iowa. Not long after the driving of the ceremonial spikes at Promontory, three railroads—Chicago & North Western; Chicago, Burlington & Quincy; and Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific—linked Chicago, the emerging railroad mecca of America, with Council Bluffs, the eastern terminus of the Union Pacific. These carriers handled the expanding “bridge” or interchange traffic with the new transcontinental route.

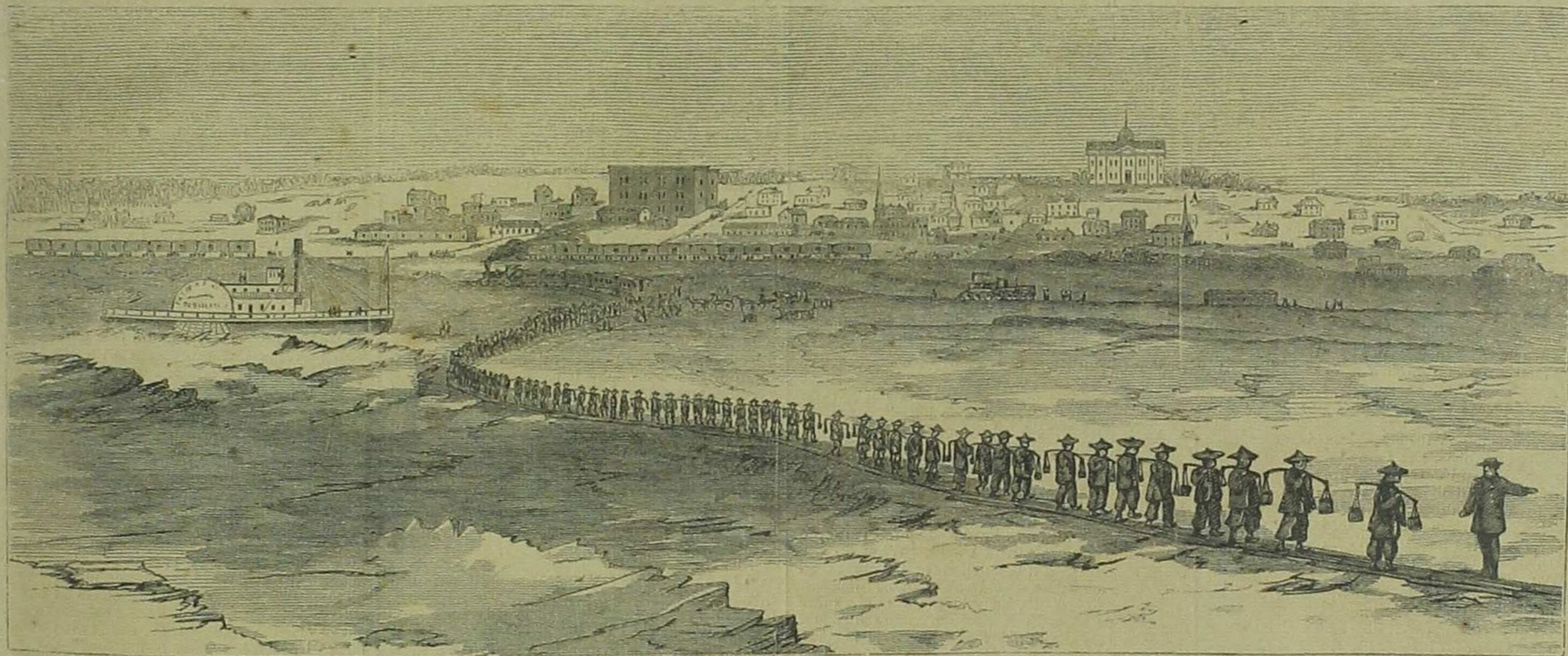
Although some Chinese returned to their homeland after the Central Pacific building period, others remained in America. California became an important center for these former railroad workers who might earn their livelihoods in farming or in restaurant and hand-laundry businesses. But some construction vet-

erans of the Central Pacific stayed with the company and remained in railroading, including building and maintenance projects outside the West. Resistance to these new Americans existed and grew. Beginning in 1868, these strong feelings led to various pieces of federal Chinese exclusion legislation and in the mid-1880s prompted a bloody strike at coal mines operated by Union Pacific in Wyoming Territory. Euro-Americans often did not take kindly to the “Heathen Chinese” who competed for good or scarce jobs, especially in the West.

Although a few Chinese drifted to Iowa and stayed, newspaper reports, both national and local, made much of a large party of Chinese passing through the Council Bluffs area months after completion of the transcontinental rails. On January 22, 1870, the widely circulated *Harper's Weekly* took notice of their activities in a brief, illustrated article, “Coolies for Texas” (right). Reported the paper: “The Mongolian invasion has begun at last in good earnest, and the advance-guard of the peaceful army has already crossed the Missouri River. On the 26th of December the first detachment of Chinese laborers engaged to work on a railroad now building in Texas, numbering 250 men, arrived opposite Council Bluffs.”

Perhaps the piece implied possible “yellow peril.” More likely, though, there existed an intrinsic interest in how these Chinese made their way from the Nebraska to the Iowa side of the stream. “The river was covered with a pack of broken ice sufficiently strong to prevent the passage of boats. [The Union Pacific would not bridge the “Mighty Mo” until 1872.] A plank walk was laid across the uneven surface, on which the Celestials passed over to the eastern side of the river . . . carrying their baggage on poles balanced over the shoulder, in true Oriental fashion.”

The Council Bluffs *Daily Nonpareil* did not ignore



CHINESE COOLIES CROSSING THE MISSOURI RIVER.—[SKETCHED BY LEAVITT BURNHAM.]

the coming into the town's midst of several hundred Chinese laborers. Under the headline "Chinamen Gone South," a story on January 14 indicated that "three hundred Chinamen came in over the Union Pacific Railroad on Monday and left in the afternoon for Memphis by the St. Joseph and Council Bluffs Railroad." Rather than suggesting that these men were bound for railroad construction in Texas, the account indicated that "they're destined for plantation work in the south. More of them are coming."

Indeed, some Chinese laborers found employment in the Deep South, including Augusta, Georgia, where they dug a canal that supplied power to mills from the waters of the Savannah River. However, another Council Bluffs paper, the *Bugle*, had announced somewhat earlier that the Chinese were headed to Memphis. "We did not learn what business they care to follow when they arrive in Memphis but understand they have been brought here under the auspices of a society organized at that point for the purpose of introducing Chinese labor into that section."

Those Chinese who made the somewhat risky crossing of the ice-choked Missouri River did not remain in Iowa, perhaps a relief to its citizenry. After all, the local press used current anti-Chinese language. The

Bugle, for one, called them "Johnny Chopstick," hardly a term of endearment. But the Chinese "invasion" warranted no meaningful concerns.

While some of these experienced railroad workers may have headed to other work sites, including Augusta, a large contingent did go to Texas, where they labored under the supervision of General John G. Walker, a former Confederate officer, on a predecessor of the gestating and strategic Texas & Pacific (T&P) Railway. The T&P would take years to complete; not until 1881 did its rails meet the Southern Pacific near El Paso, forging a second transcontinental rail route.

As with their earlier involvement with the Central Pacific, these Chinese laborers helped to bind together the American nation-state with iron rails, making possible the benefits of the long-lasting Railway Age. ♦

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