

Chinese Doctors at Warren
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In the backcountry of Idaho accidents or illness could mean death. A doctor was a rare commodity and when life was at stake people became less concerned about race and more concerned about skills.

Ah Kan and Lee Dick were two healers in Warren, Idaho who, because of their skill in treating the sick, were called doctors. Although willing to call on American doctors in emergencies, Chinese miners generally depended on their own physicians for medical care. The Chinese commercial network regularly distributed imported herbal medicines to distant communities, and every major mining camp had at least one or two resident Chinese Doctors, who practiced their native medicine in town and traveled to remote areas to do so as well.¹

Traditional Chinese herbal medicine is based on plant, mineral and animal substances. One of Ah Kan and Lee Dick's unusual methods of treatment was the use of mold for curing infection. This was long before the discovery of penicillin.² Herbal medicine fulfilled an important health need in the nineteenth century for both Chinese and non-Chinese residents.³ Patent medicines were widely used, but were often ineffectual in curing diseases, and their contents were not regulated by any government agency and so were often harmful. As a result, Western doctors sometimes resorted to drastic measures, such as bleeding. Comparatively, Chinese herbal remedies had thousands of years of study and refinement to develop their effectiveness.

An ad for Ayer's Sarsaparilla found in The Warren Times in 1893 expresses the support Euro-Americans had for Chinese medicine. It also describes the philosophy behind Chinese medicine for treating general health. It reads, "The Chinese pay their doctor only so long as he keeps them in health. They believe in preventing rather than curing disease. This is sound sense, and one of the strongest recommendations, of a medicine that not only cures diseases but prevents them."

Many Euro-American miners and residents in Warren relied on Ah Kan and Lee Dick for treatments of various ailments and held the doctors in high regard. John Rousteson tells of being taken to Warren in the early 1900s to a Chinese doctor for a broken leg. He said he received excellent care and the leg was put in a cast made of different materials than Western doctors used. Today one would never know the leg was broken.⁴ There is also documentation in 1919, of Lee Dick traveling to Edwardsburg to aid a young lady that had accidentally shot herself with a rifle. The Warren Times, 1919, November 7 (PLS) states, "Lee Dick, a resident of Warren for the past 18 years, is returning to his home in China. Dr. Dick, as we call him, has saved many lives in this section owing to his knowledge of Chinese medicine. Hardly a person in this section has not come under his care and is with regret that we must bid him farewell. He was the highest type of his class that we have ever met, far above the average Chinese in this country. He left here with good fortune from placer mining."



Portrait of Lee Dick

Ah Kan on the other hand remained in Warren, prior to being a healer Ah Kan had made a fortune as a miner. He had returned to China with his fortune, but he soon missed the adventure of America and returned to Warren. Upon his return he realized mining had become less profitable and so he became an herbal doctor who was very popular with the children. Ah Kan was the last of the Chinese immigrants living in Warren until he died in 1934.

¹ No Need To Rush, Liping Zhu, Montana Historical Society, Montana Magazine of Western History, Autumn 1999.

² Idaho Chinese Lore, M. Alfreda Elsensohn, Idaho Corporation of Benedictine Sisters, Cottonwood, Idaho, 1979.

³ Five Views: Chinese Americans in California, Nancy Wey, Ph.D., Researcher, Writer, and Lecturer, California State University, San Jose and Long Beach, July 1999.

⁴ The History of Chinese in Idaho from 1864 to 1910, Fern Coble Trull, A Thesis, University of Oregon June 1946.