

The Chinese Cemetery at Warren

USDA Forest Service

Payette National Forest, Heritage Program

On a hillside just northwest of Warren lies a cemetery resting above the mining scars of the gold rush era of central Idaho. The empty graves give testimony to the powerful call of opportunity that drove Chinese sojourners to come to a foreign land to make their lives better at home. While in America, even in the wilderness of Idaho, they had a strong desire to maintain their traditions and a sense of their Chinese identity.

After the onset of the California gold Rush of 1848, thousands of Chinese immigrants arrived by ship on the West Coast of the United States. They came seeking fortunes in the gold fields, railroad camps, fish canneries, and later, the great agricultural ranches of the southwest. Determined to retain their cultural identity, the Chinese were but sojourners in a foreign land, to return one day with untold wealth.¹ These Chinese immigrants were primarily from six districts of the Guangdong (previously Kwangtung) Province.² The seemingly endless wave of immigrants soon journeyed beyond California arriving in Idaho during the 1860s. As the Chinese ventured into the Idaho wilderness, so too, came the “Six Companies,” clan societies to provide housing, protection, and to mediate disputes among those from one district or another.³ The company would also ship the bodies of workers back to China if should they die while in America.

The Warren mining District was organized in 1862 following the discovery of rich placers within Warren Creek. For a time, exclusionary laws prohibited Chinese from working claims in the Warren Mining district. Warren experienced a boom for several years but most of the “free gold” was exhausted by 1868.⁴ In 1869, Warren Euro-American miners voted to open the district to the Chinese. Although Chinese miners were unable to purchase land, except for lots in the town of Warren, they were permitted to buy claims or lease the rights to placer operations. From 1870-1900, at least twelve Chinese mining companies monopolized the gravel placers of Warren. The labor-intensive companies often worked the ground of a single claim two or three times over.⁵

In the Warren Mining District the population fluctuated seasonally, Chinese were the dominant ethnicity outnumbering all other groups combined. Although the 1870 and 1880 censuses recorded only 400 Chinese people, estimates of Chinese population during the years 1870-1900 range from 600 to 1,200.⁶ Most were traditional adult male sojourner households. The Chinese markedly influenced the social and cultural composition of the Warren district.⁷ In the partially segregated community the Chinese created their own cemetery and practiced their customs surrounding the dead. The cemetery was used exclusively during the period between 1870 and 1920 for the burial of Chinese. The year 1887 is significant in that the “feeding of the dead” at Warren was widely reported. The Grangeville Free Press, September 2, 1887, published this article during that time:

“The Chinese in camp had a grand festival last Sunday, the occasion being the feeding of the dead. Several hogs and chickens were barbecued and taken to the burying ground and were then brought back and made a repast for the living... About ten o’clock at night they burned a whole lot of joss sticks and colored paper and spilled lots of indifferent whiskey on the ground as an obligation to the evil spirits...”



The metal Dragon memorial at the Chinese Cemetery at Warren.

The burials, on a hillside, were arranged in parallel rows oriented northeast to southwest. The majority of the graves are concentrated on both sides of the mortuary. A mortuary is utilized as part of Chinese cultural practices. In Warren it may have also been used for storage of bodies when the ground was too frozen to excavate the traditional grave. It is believed that name plates affixed to wooded markers attached with square nails were used to identify graves. The name plates facilitated identification so the remains could be exhumed and shipped to the Chinese homeland. A total of 29 burial slots have been documented as part of the Chinese Cemetery. Oral tradition and artifacts indicate that the site experienced cemetery related activity intermittently from 1870 to 1920, with exhumation ceremonies as late as the 1930s.

One resident, Frank Sheiffer, reportedly witnessed an exhumation. He said he had gone up to the cemetery to watch the men dig up the bodies. They uncovered the body of a Chinese woman that had not decomposed. When they realized it was a woman they covered up the body.⁸ Women did not have the same rights as men and the grave diggers were not paid to exhume them. There are several local stories that mention that a Chinese woman, Too Hay, and perhaps one or two other individuals were never exhumed. It is believed that these are the only remaining burials at the site.

Exhumation was an important burial practice among overseas Chinese and has been documented at several Idaho cemeteries. When a Chinese man died, the body was in most cases, eventually shipped back to China. Relatives would take up the bones and boil them before they were sent off on their long journey. The Chinese believed that when the flesh decomposed the devil was driven out. It was customary for them to leave dishes of food on the graves, and also numerous small confetti-like papers with small holes in them, the idea being that through these the devil could not get to the body of the deceased, but would become confused if he attempted to find his way among all the supposed obstructions.⁹

The parcel of land containing the Chinese cemetery is owned and maintained by the Payette National Forest. The original trail, used historically by the Chinese to visit the cemetery, is still used by visitors today. The metal Dragon Memorial was erected in 1984 by a local informant Herb McDowell to commemorate the Chinese as a part of the heritage of Warren.

This important vestige of ethnic heritage and social history of the Warren Mining District is listed on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP). This is one of the only cemeteries in Idaho listed on the National Register of Historic Places and is considered a gem on the Payette National Forest.

¹ Kate O'Brian Reed, Chinese Sites in the Warren Mining District, National Register of Historic Places, MPS 90000893, 1989.

² Ruth Hum Lee, The Growth and Decline of Chinese Communities in the Rocky Mountain Region, PhD dissertation, University of Chicago, 1947, Reprinted, Arno Press, New York, 1978, p.22.

³ Jack Chen, The Chinese in America, Harper and Row, San Francisco, 1982. P.27.

⁴ O'Brian Reed 1989

⁵ Sheila Reddy, The Chinese Pioneer in Idaho: an Overview, Heritage Program, Payette national Forest, 1993.

⁶ Reddy 1993

⁷ O'Brian Reed 1989

⁸ Frank Sheiffer, Payette National Forest Historic 1680 Files, Heritage Program, Payette National Forest, 1987.

⁹ Sister M. Elsensohn, Idaho Chinese Lore, Benedictine Sisters, Cottonwood, Idaho 1979, p.32.