

FEATURE

Who were the Pershing Chinese?

They were Chinese immigrants living in Texas and in Mexico in the early 20th Century.

A Report from *Chinese American Heroes*

Hundreds of Chinese from Texas and Mexico supported the US Army in 1916 and were allowed to stay in America and eventually became citizens. They were dedicated and loyal Chinese immigrants who served our military without ever wearing the uniform.

Few people have ever heard of the Pershing Chinese. They were Chinese immigrants living in Texas and in Mexico in the early 20th Century. (The plight of the Chinese Americans has been examined in other places on the Chinese American Heroes website).

The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was emblematic of official American attitudes towards the Chinese, making Chinese Texans vulnerable to deportation at government whim as they were not legal American residents and by law were barred from becoming American citizens.

The Chinese in Mexico were not loved either, as there was much resentment of the success of many small Chinese businesses. They were the targets of discrimination and persecution by Mexican politicians and businessmen, who used them as convenient scapegoats for poverty and corruption. Because Chinese women were far less likely to immigrate there was a severe shortage of marriageable women in that immigrant community. As a result some Chinese men married Mexican women, which led to unsubstantiated sexual allegations made against them out of jealousy. This created even more tension against Chinese immigrants in Mexico.



Army four star General John J. (Black Jack) Pershing.

In March 9, 1916, Pancho Villa and his rebels crossed the border and killed eighteen American soldiers and civilians in Columbus, New Mexico. On March 15, 1916, Major General John J. Pershing, stationed at Fort Bliss, Texas, was ordered to pursue and capture Villa by President Woodrow Wilson. However, in 1916, the US Army had an embryonic logistics (Quartermaster Corps), which was not capable of providing timely logistics to the Army in Texas, a long rail ride from any of the main American military supply bases.

This mission was known as the Mexican Punitive Expedition, and General Pershing had to come up with a solution for supplying his troops in hot pursuit of Pancho Villa through Northern Mexico. He decided to put an ad in the local Texas paper, and received a very surprising response. Several hundred local Chinese in Texas jumped at the opportunity to earn the princely sum of \$.20 an hour.

The first important task the Chinese accomplished was clearing the Texas landscape of heavy brush and sage, so that the military camp could be setup, and simultaneously, provide hot meals and laundry services. The Chinese worked very hard, put in a lot of extra work and effort, and the camp was established quickly.

In addition to cooking and washing services, they provided what might be called the first mobile Army Exchange. Throughout the Expedition, the Chinese provided important “comfort” supplies including soap, towels, tobacco, matches, candy, doughnuts, and fruit. Hot meals (Chinese dishes of course) and hot liquid. One of the biggest, and then unrecognized, vital services was potable water. Chinese recognized the importance of drinking boiled water, and using boiled water for coffee and other drinks. Army canteens were filled with boiled water. This protected the troops from dysentery and other diseases easily acquired from drinking untreated water from streams and rivers. The General’s troops were well fed and healthy, and most importantly, fit to fight in attempting to chase down Pancho Villa.

Pershing led a force of 6,675 men that penetrated about 400 miles into Mexico. They defeated Villa’s revolutionaries in several skirmishes but failed to capture their leader. Villa eventually negotiated an amnesty with the Mexican authorities in 1920 but was assassinated in 1923, probably with the support and collusion



"Pershing's Chinese" in San Antonio, July 1917— The occasion is the Chinese Oriental Night for the American Red Cross. © Copyright 1999, The Institute of Texan Cultures

of the Mexican government. In all, about 10,000 to 12,000 American regular troops became involved in the campaign at some point. In addition, 100,000 National Guard troops were ordered mobilized by President Wilson but they remained defending the American border and never crossed over into Mexico. Supplying all of these troops through such a remote area of the country and into Northern Mexico was a major challenge.

During the campaign, hundreds of Chinese residing in Mexico joined the expedition and added manpower to the American logistics mission. Chinese in Mexico had already been targeted for death as some had joined President Carranza’s Mexican government forces to defeat Villa. Villa’s forces had retaliated whenever they found Chinese, and reportedly several entire Chinese families were murdered, including the Mexican wives of the Chinese. Several hundred of the Mexican Chinese requested permission to leave with Pershing’s Army when they returned to the United States and the expedition ended in February 1917.

General Pershing did not forget his Chinese supporters from the Mexican campaign. In 1919, armed with the prestige he’d earned as the victorious commander of the American Expeditionary Forces in Europe during World

War I, and newly promoted to the rank of General of the Armies of the United States, the highest rank even given to any member of the United States armed forces, he and William Tracy Page, began a campaign to allow the Pershing Chinese to become legal permanent residents.

William Tracy Page had been an Immigration Bureau officer in the American colony of the Philippines who'd been assigned as a civilian adviser to the 2,700 Mexican refugees, 527 of whom were Chinese, who were settled in Texas. He became a friend and tireless advocate of the Chinese as a result. In this effort the men were joined by the Chinese Benevolent Association and ordinary Chinese Americans across the United States.

On November 23, 1921, President Warren G. Harding signed Public Law No. 29, which granted the Pershing Chinese permanent residency rights. PL #29 established a legal precedent in immigration law, introducing special consideration for immigrants escaping political persecution.

In 1921, the Chinese Exclusion Act (CEA) was still in full force keeping Chinese immigrants out of America, and was not repealed until 1943. In reality, the repealing of the CEA only opened up a small crack in the immigration doorway for Chinese immigrants as only 105 from around the world were allowed to be admitted each year. However, it finally granted the right to become naturalized citizens to legal residents of Chinese origin already in the United States, among which were those Chinese refugees from Mexico and the Chinese Texans.

It was not until the October 1965 that the Hart Cellar Act abolished national origin quotas and increased the Chinese quota to 20,000

annually. Until this act was passed, the population of Chinese in America continued to atrophy.

The only other relief had been the War Brides Act of 1945 with later amendment that opened the door a little bit, as several thousand Chinese American veterans and veterans of other races were able bring over their wives from China and Chinese and mixed race families began to appear in many locations.

The Pershing Chinese were a very special group of individuals who were willing to take risks in accompanying the US Army at war. Many saved every penny they earned and started small businesses after the Mexican Expedition was over. Some of these families still reside in Texas.

Today, there are roughly 4.6 million Chinese Americans in the U.S. - the Chinese American population has come a long way since 1965. Many Chinese Americans have made major contributions to our Country, but few of us know anything about their contributions. Chinese American Heroes started chronicling nominated heroes who have made significant contributions. We hope that visitors to our website at www.chineseamericanheroes.org will be curious about Chinese Americans in many professions who have done a lot for America.

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The Chairman of Chinese American Heroes attended the 2009 National OCA convention in Houston, TX and learned about the Pershing Chinese when he met Mr. Irwin A. Tang, the author and editor of "Texas Asians - our History and Our Lives", a compendium of essays on the history of Asians in the state of Texas upon which this article is based.