

## FEATURE

# U.S. inducts Chinese Railroad Workers into Labor Hall of Honor

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**O**n May 9, U.S. Secretary of Labor Thomas E. Perez formally inducted into the Labor Hall of Honor about 12,000 Chinese immigrant laborers who worked on the Central Pacific Railroad between 1865 and 1869. They are the first Asian Americans to receive such a tribute since the establishment of the Hall of Honor in 1988.

Joining Perez in the ceremony at the César E. Chávez Memorial Auditorium in Washington D.C. were U.S. Deputy Secretary of Labor Christopher P. Lu, Assistant Secretary of Labor for Employment and Training Portia Wu, Director of the Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs Patricia A. Shiu, U.S. Rep. Grace Meng, former Secretary of Commerce and Transportation Norman Y. Mineta, and Director of the National Domestic Worker Alliance Ai-jen Poo.

“It was backbreaking, dangerous work,” wrote Secretary Perez on the Dept. of Labor blog.

The ceremony to induct Chinese railroad workers into the U.S. Dept. of Labor Hall of Honor was held May 9 in Washington D.C. (Photo by Dept. of Labor/Shawn T. Moore)

“Many of these workers died from the harsh winters and brutal conditions. They laid tracks on terrain that rose 7,000 feet in less than 100 miles, chipped away at the granite and planted explosives that were used to blast tunnels through the treacherous Sierra Nevada Mountains.”

Enduring prejudice, low wages, and social isolation, Perez said, “The Chinese railroad workers courageously took a stand to organize for fairer wages and safer working conditions. In addition to connecting the nation and building its



*U.S. Deputy Secretary of Labor Christopher P. Lu, former Secretary of Commerce and Transportation Norman Y. Mineta, U.S. Rep. Grace Meng, and U.S. Secretary of Labor Thomas E. Perez attended the induction ceremony. (Photo by Dept. of Labor/Shawn T. Moore)*

infrastructure, they also advanced American ideals of equal opportunity and the dignity of work for everyone, immigrant and American-born alike.”

“I am proud to see the Chinese railroad workers recognized for the contributions they made to our country,” said California U.S. Rep. Judy Chu. “In the face of dangerous labor conditions and discriminatory treatment, these immigrant laborers gave their blood, sweat, and tears to connect our country from coast-to-coast. They created the backbone of our nation’s infrastructure and paved the way for America’s prosperity.”

“Being part of this induction ceremony was a tremendous honor,” said U.S. Rep. Grace Meng of New York. “These workers played an integral role in the growth of our nation and they’re a key part of American history. Despite the dangerous and challenging working conditions they were forced to endure, these

individuals worked tirelessly to help build our country.”

*@mmasianweekly June 20, 2014*

## Letters from the Readers

Sent: Fri, May 23, 2014 6:29 pm

Subject: Fwd: Fw: Chinese railroad workers from 150 yrs ago are finally recognized!

Finally after 150 years, we, Chinese, get recognition for the danger, back breaking coolie labor, low pay, sacrificing our lives to build the Continental Railroad. Better late than never and good thing, we, Chinese, are patient people.

*Harry*

Folks,

I don't know if any of you viewed the live webcast from last Friday's Department of Labor's presentation. I did, and I'm so glad I did. There was a panel of 4 Chinese-American women that even included one Congresswoman from NY. They were all articulate, well informed, and thoroughly familiar with our history of the past century and a half. Their command of spoken English tells me none of them grew up in a Chinatown as many of us did.

Because the nearly 12,000 Chinese railroad workers who completed the western portion of the transcontinental railway had never been officially acknowledged for their role, the Department of Labor finally corrected that injustice. They were ignored when the final spike was pounded in at Promontory Summit during May, 1869, and again during the centennial celebration in May, 1969.

However, because of the prodding of some of our today's Chinese-American leaders, all this was addressed in Friday's impressive ceremony. Former Congressman, Cabinet Secretary of Transportation, and SJ Mayor Norm Mineta gave the concluding remarks, and they were thoughtfully prepared. He saluted the Chinese railroad worker who changed the economic dynamics exponentially with the postbellum completion of the transcontinental railroad, changing the time frame of what had formerly taken 6 months of transportation to 1 week for

goods to be carried from east coast to west and vice versa.

Awesome! From 6 months to 1 week! And all it took were Chinese workers averaging 5 feet in height and a hundred pounds in weight. Mix that in with daring, skill, courage, tenacity, a fraternal bond that kept them one-spirited some ten thousand miles from home, and you can begin to wonder how they can possibly be ignored for nearly a century and a half. In fact, I was reminded today that the derogatory expression, a “Chinaman's chance,” was derived from the experience of those Chinese workers assigned to set off the dynamite that blasted passage through the Sierra mountains. Some did, and some didn't survive that ordeal. To add to the insult, they were routinely paid less than non-Chinese railroad workers, prompting several thousand of them to strike for higher wages at one point, a salient point underscored by today's Dept of Labor presenters, who gave these early Chinese workers credit for their role in the Labor Movement of this nation.

I could rattle on and on, but I would encourage you to view the Department of Labor's YouTube footage <http://www.youtube.com/user/USDepartmentofLabor> I admit I wondered if it would be worth watching, but it turned out I was richly rewarded for doing so. Just reading the text would be a total disservice to Secretary of Labor Tony Perez, whose excellent presentation was punctuated with attention gaining facial expressions as well as emphatic speech. It's a no-brainer. Got to see it.



*Connie Young Yu*

Originally, I was interested because my paternal grandfather's older brother, Ah Ai-Gung, and my paternal great-grandfather, Ah Bok-Kung, were both railroad workers at one time. In addition, one of the speakers was Connie Young Yu, my GWHS classmate Janey's younger sister, whose great-grandfather was also a railroad worker. She represented the descendants of the Chinese railroad worker and spoke on their behalf.

I was not disappointed. When she recounted the exploits of all those workers, I felt connected as well and personally felt the ravages of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, the rejection of a once unkind American society. Gratefully, much has changed in my lifetime, and I've reaped the rewards of a just nation. That much of our progressive and generous society today can be traced to the selfless deeds of those early Chinese workers is a soothing balm.

Kudos to the Departmentt of Labor for finally giving these workers their just due.

Kudos to the Departmentt of Labor in crediting the early Chinese workers for establishing an infrastructure that allowed this nation to thrive. As their descendants, we can glow vicariously and walk a bit taller.

From: Philip Chin <pc@asianamericanbooks.com>  
Sent: Fri, May 30, 2014 03:00 AM

It really isn't a question of what nationality could have done it. My contention is that for the right price the Irish or any nationality would have done the same work.

What has to be kept in mind, in addition to most of the Irish being on the East Coast during that time, was the acute shortage of labor on the West Coast. Only the Chinese were available in sufficient numbers to make the building of the railroad economically viable enough to achieve. Labor was so rare and expensive that for years it was cheaper to send laundry to China to have it done and returned to California months later rather than pay for it to be done in California.

Charles Crocker makes the point over and over again in his testimony to Congress, white guys weren't taking jobs with the railroad in sufficient numbers despite the high pay offered because they had better and more lucrative opportunities elsewhere that didn't involve risking their lives in the middle of nowhere.

The Central Pacific Railroad advertised up and down the state for 5000 white guys and only 400 responded in 1864. If they'd waited for sufficient white guys to show up, Stanford and all the rest of those guys would have lost their shirts

and we wouldn't even have a Stanford University today.

Crocker and the rest of them were just lucky that by the time the railroad was being built most of the river gold had already been mined out and the big companies had taken over and were digging deep pit mines all over for the gold. Those big mining concerns were pretty much hiring whites only for even higher wages than the railroad.

The Chinese were already being driven out of the gold fields and the countryside by angry white miners looking for those last bits of river gold so they were already looking for work. Crocker made such a success of his Chinese workers that the big mining concerns started grabbing them up by 1866 and they had to raise wages to compete.

From what I've been reading I'd estimate if the Irish had built the entire railroad from start to finish from Omaha, Nebraska to Sacramento, California, it would have added at least three years to the construction time. Just getting through the Sierra Nevada Mountains took the Central Pacific 2 years and the main tunnel took from 1866 to 1869 to complete.

Those Chinese were working faster in the tunnels than the white guys according to Crocker. So at least 3 more years of construction and untold more millions of dollars to complete the Transcontinental Railroad so that some people could indulge in their racial prejudices?

Even the most prejudiced majority of congressmen were smart enough to wait until the Chinaman completed the work first before they stabbed him in the back with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Money overcomes a lot of prejudices, at least until the money is gone.

*Philip*