

## Gold Mining at the MON-TUNG Chinese Site in the Snake River Canyon

Chinese immigrants called America the Gold Mountain, *Gum Shan*. When gold was discovered in northern Idaho during the early 1860's, over 4,000 Chinese came to the many temporary gold rush camps that sprang up virtually overnight. In fact, the Chinese made up over half of Idaho's gold miners in 1870.

In 1869, gold was discovered in the Snake River Canyon below the Shoshone Falls. During the 1870's, several hundred American miners entered the isolated interior of the Snake River Canyon searching the rocky slopes and river sand bars for the very fine, very pure, flour gold. Three mining camps--Shoshone, Drytown, and Springtown--were established in the canyon, providing the miners with stores, saloons, a dry goods house, a butcher shop, and restaurants.

As the yield from the placer claims diminished, many American miners sold their claims to Chinese prospectors. They first entered the canyon some time in the fall of 1870 and reworked claims abandoned by the whites and prospected new sites. The Chinese miners were thorough,

burrowing into the boulder-strewn canyon slopes in pursuit of gold-bearing sand deposits. They lived along the river in crude, rock-walled shelters roofed with canvas. Along one area near Springtown, Chinese miners built small, terraced gardens and raised herbs and vegetables. The remains of several Chinese shelters are still present in the canyon.

The Chinese stayed in the canyon for several years. Due to laws banning Chinese immigration and hostility from the white settlers, Idaho's Chinese population declined during the 1890's. By the 1900's, the Chinese and their contribution to Idaho's history were almost forgotten.



During the summer of 1986, Kimberly resident Gary Stone found an old rusty can containing a deed dated November 1871. The deed documents the transfer of Captain Relf Bledsoe's mining claim to two Chinese miners. Archeological site 10JE89, named Mon-Tung in recognition of the two Chinese men named in Bledsoe's deed, is quite possibly the same placer claim described in the 1871 deed.

Gary Stone shared his discovery with Twin Falls history teacher, Ron James. Ron was already researching the history of the Snake River Canyon Mining period for his Master's thesis. Ron sought advice and permission from the Shoshone District Bureau of Land Management to conduct a scientific archaeological excavation of the Mon-Tung site. The excavation produced hundreds of historic artifacts dating to the 1870's and 1880's. The artifacts include Chinese ceramics, coins, opium paraphernalia, and mining tools.

The Chinese valued their ethnic heritage and attempted to retain as many of their cultural traits as was feasible. As a result, Chinese sites such as the Mon-Tung are

very distinctive in their artifact assemblage. The Mon-Tung excavation has provided archaeologists and historians with an opportunity to view a little known but significant chapter of Idaho's frontier history.

*This information is from a Master's Thesis prepared by Ron James.*

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