

Baker City's Chinatown
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Baker City had a small Chinese ghetto for about 110 years. The 1870 Federal census lists 29 Chinese in Baker City, which had a total population of 312. Since they are listed together on the census lists, one may reasonably conclude that they were all living in the same part of town, that is, in what was called Chinatown in the 1700 block of Auburn between Resort and Powder River.



Chinatown, ca. 1890.

*Powder River is on the far side of the line of fence posts.
Auburn Street ended at the Chinese temple (rounded roof),
present location of Baker City Police Department.
Just a foot bridge led to the east side of the river.*

Chinatown was still there in the early 1940's but its population had dwindled to very few. When the mines were going great guns in the late 1800's and early 1900's, there were several hundred Chinese living in Chinatown, especially in the winter when placer mines could not be worked. By 1880 Baker City's population was 1,197 of which 143 were female and 166 were Chinese.

Baker City's Chinatown was not the only place one found significant numbers of Chinese living in Baker County. The 1870 census listed 237 Chinese living in Auburn

and 224 living in Clarksville. In all of Baker County, the 1870 census reports 674 Chinese, 89% of which were listed as miners. Other occupations were washerman (20), cook (17), prostitute (11), trader in Chinese merchandise (8), gambler (8), doctor (3), gardener (3), keeps gambling house (2), washerwoman (1), domestic servant (1), interpreter (1), and shoemaker (1).

Under the occupation “miner” was no doubt understood those who built the hundreds of miles of ditches to supply water to placer mines. Early Baker County historian Isaac Hiatt reported, “Construction of the ditch [Eldorado Ditch built in the 1870’s in the Burnt River area] was done mostly by pick and shovel, employing up to 1,000 Chinese laborers at a time, with an additional white crew as well.”

When in 1884 the Oregon Railway & Navigation Co. was building track in Eastern Oregon on the way to meet up with the Oregon Short Line coming from the east, a newspaper described the activity. “Two thousand Chinamen are engaged with the construction now in Grande Ronde Valley. One thousand lay down the ties and another thousand follow along behind the train and fill in [with dirt between the ties]. A large force of white men place and spike the rails.”



Chinatown, ca. 1940.

An apartment house has replaced some of the shacks.

Those that remain have undergone a facelift.

And the Chinese temple has disappeared.

Today not one stick of wood or brick remains to remind us of Baker City’s Chinatown. But the next time you park in the new police station parking lot, think about the fact that for decades that was the site of a Chinese temple.