

Chinese Properties Listed in the National Register

A Forest Service Initiative

Lawrence A. Kingsbury

The Cultural Resource Management Heritage Program of the Payette National Forest has made it a priority to be in accord with the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, and to nominate eligible properties to the National Register of Historic Places. Today, the Payette National Forest likely has more listed buildings, structures, features, and sites than any other national forest in the Pacific Northwest. Cultural properties unique to the Payette National Forest include a multiple property listing for the only 19th-century Chinese occupations and activity areas in the Warren Mining District.

Other historic properties in the forest include stratified prehistoric archeological sites (part of the listed Krassel Ranger Station site) and the Cabin Creek Historic District, which contains buildings, ruins, ditches, and trails reflecting early ranching activity within the Frank

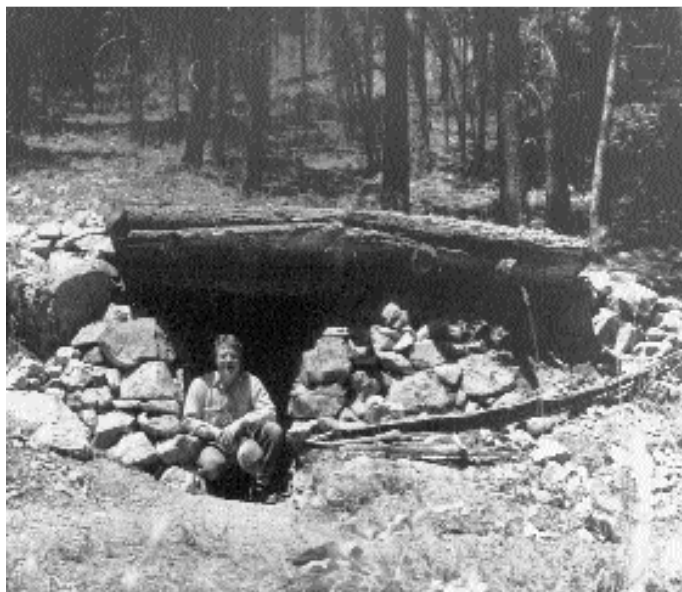


The Old China Trail connects the three Chinese garden sites in the Warren Mining District, Payette National Forest, ID. Photo by Tom Dureka.

In the late-19th century, thousands of Chinese immigrants traveled to the western United States. Some came to America to make their fortunes in the gold and silver mines. Many Chinese came to America to find employment opportunities in agriculture, fishing, fish processing canneries, railroads, or wherever opportunity presented itself. From the Pacific ports, Chinese immigrants continued their journey east to the intermountain region of the American west. Most of the Chinese planned to return to China when they acquired enough money. However, not all wanted to return to China, nor did all Chinese make enough money to return to their homeland, and some died young.

Chinese merchants and miners were present in northern and southwestern Idaho before they reached the isolated Warren Mining District in the mountains of west-central Idaho. The Warren Mining District was organized in 1862, when placer gold was discovered within Warren Meadows, in an area that is now part of the Payette National Forest. In 1869, American and European miners voted to repeal the exclusion rules and open the mining district to the Chinese. Hundreds of Chinese men and a few women arrived in 1870. One notable Chinese woman who came to Warren was Lalu Nathoy, locally called "Polly Bemis" or "Aunt Polly." Polly's life has become popularized by the book and major motion picture, "Thousand Pieces of Gold." Her home is listed in the National Register.

Most Chinese men came to Warren, ID, to work at mining placer gold for themselves. Others labored to repay debts to Chinese companies responsible for transporting them to the United States. Chinese men leased mining claims from the Americans and Europeans. Some Chinese provided supporting services within the mining district. Such professions included merchants, livestock



The author sits at the entrance to the Ah Toy Garden habitation site. Photo by Larry Kingsbury.

Church-River Of No Return Wilderness. The Payette National Forest also has 26 buildings within four complexes that reveal four different architectural styles, reflecting significance in USDA Forest Service history. In addition, two fire lookout towers with associated buildings were nominated to the National Register in late 1993. However, within recent years, the Chinese cultural properties have been of particular public interest.

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Transportation concerns pervade the history of Bedford, Pennsylvania. The Bedford Historic District includes this ca. 1936 Art Deco gasoline station for its association with early automobile travel on the Lincoln Highway (present-day Route 30). Photo by Tanya M. Velt.

provides a tourism substitute. In Williamsport, the Chamber of Commerce actively promotes the Millionaires' Row Historic District, and has reported increased tourism there since National Register listing in 1985.

One area of the National Register program ripe for improvement is communication between local governments, State Historic Preservation Offices (SHPOs), and the National Park Service. For instance, in none of the three municipalities studied did National Register listing of historic districts inspire local government to apply for Certified Local Government (CLG) status. CLG status makes federal Historic Preservation Fund monies available to municipalities, increases local representation in state historic preservation planning, and provides for local review of National Register nominations.

Public education is also vital to the National Register program at the local level and may require direct state involvement. Repeated incidents in all three municipalities reflect some public misconceptions and mistrust of the National Register as a regulatory device. However, in Bedford, where Pennsylvania SHPO representatives were most welcomed and viewed as knowledgeable and objective partners in the survey and nomination process, owner objections to historic district listing were minimal.

The National Register program is not a panacea for local preservation challenges. It is, however, a valuable tool for prioritizing resource needs, organizing governmental responses to those needs, educating the public, and providing economic assistance for rehabilitation.

Notes

¹ Tanya M. Velt, "The Influence of National Register of Historic Places Listing of Historic Districts on Local Preservation Planning" (Master's thesis, Cornell University, 1993).

² Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, Bureau for Historic Preservation.

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packers transporting goods, saloon keepers, operators of gambling and opium establishments, herbal doctors, laborers, vegetable gardeners, farmers, butchers, and launderers. These people left archeological evidence of their activities upon the historic landscape of the Payette National Forest. The Chinese terraced and farmed hillsides to grow vegetable gardens for their own consumption and sold the surplus. The gardeners marketed their vegetables to the mining district community. Three Chinese terraced garden areas and two occupation sites are interconnected by a trail and are listed in the National Register. Another associated Chinese site, a cemetery, was recently nominated.

After 1870, the Chinese established their own segregated cemetery and mortuary. This cemetery was intended for temporary internment only. It was a Chinese custom that if they should die in a foreign land the bones of the deceased were disinterred for reburial with their ancestors in their homeland. For this privilege the Chinese workers paid Chinese companies a tax for returning the bones of the deceased to China. However, not everyone paid the tax and today several bodies remain at the segregated Chinese cemetery in the forest. Near this cemetery are National Register-eligible ruins of a Chinese company mining camp.

The Chinese company mining camp was investigated and recorded by archeologists with the USDA Forest Service and archeologists, students, and volunteers from the University of Idaho. This camp consists of a large common activity building used for shelter, preparing meals, and recreational activities. A residence, a blacksmith forge, two privies, a terraced garden, and a gold bearing placer hydrologic mine are also associated with the camp. Using the collected data, photographs, and maps produced by the archeologists, this property will be nominated under the multiple property listing in 1994.

The Payette National Forest's Cultural Resource Management Heritage Program has created six interpretive signs reflecting Chinese history, two exhibits containing artifacts of Chinese manufacture and utilized tools, a brochure used with the self-guided interpretive trail of the China Mountain Terraced Gardens, and four short informative papers about the Chinese presence in the forest. Because of the remote setting of the Warren Mining District within the Salmon River Mountains, the historic Chinese sites are accessible only during the snow-free period from spring through early fall. Chinese Americans from as far away as New York City and Hawaii have visited the China Mountain Terraced Gardens Interpretive Site, a National Register property.

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