

Bloomington Rolled Up Welcome Mat for Early Chinese Laundrymen



This circa early 1890s photograph of an unidentified Chinese American or Chinese immigrant as taken by Thomas P. Garrett, probably at his 221 North Main St. studio. Chinese immigrants began arriving to Bloomington in the mid-1870s, and for more than a quarter century they often faced ridicule, harassment and ostracism, both on the street and in the halls of government.

Bloomington newspapers, including *The Pantagraph*, referred to these newly arrived immigrants using a host of derogatory terms, such as celestials (since China was known as the Celestial Kingdom), as well as Mongolians, heathens, “little brown men,” and even “washees,” as most worked at laundries (which in turn were called “washee-washees”). Mention was also made of pig tails, “almond eyes” and “hitting the opium pipe.”

Ah Moo Long’s, Bloomington’s first known Chinese laundry, shows up in the city directory as early as 1875, and was originally located at 113 East Jefferson Street. In January 1884, a hack driver by the name of Frank Steele threw a dead rat into one of Ah Moo Long’s tub of clean clothes (malicious rumor held that Chinese immigrants ate rats). “This enraged Ah Moo, and, accompanied by a half dozen of his celestials, they gave chase,” reported *The Pantagraph*. A “lively scrimmage” (that is, brawl) ensued before Steele fled once again, and though Ah Moo Long swore out a warrant for Steele’s arrest, the instigator was charged only with resisting a police officer.

By 1889, there were five Chinese laundries in Bloomington, including Chang Han's, 109 South Center Street; Wing Hop's, 103 West Monroe; and Sam Long's, 214 East Front.

Back in May 1884, laundryman Long Hong was accidentally shot and killed by another Chinese immigrant carelessly handling a 44-caliber revolver. According to *The Pantagraph*, the deceased was in his early 30s with a wife and two children back in southern China. Laundrymen often worked in the U.S. for several years before returning home with hard-earned savings. Throughout the early era of Chinese laundries in Bloomington, there is no indication the small community ever included women or children. Long Hong had come to America about two years earlier, and had worked in Bloomington for about half that time. His personal property consisted of little more than \$40 in savings and a blanket, and he was buried at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery, a world away from home and family.

Local Chinese immigrants were often the target of not only cruel pranks by street toughs, but harassment by city officials. In late November 1885, city police broke up what was said to be a game of Chinese poker at a Front Street laundry, and the participants were taken to the police station and ordered to pay fines.

Rev. John W. Dinsmore of Second Presbyterian Church and local attorney Frank Y. Hamilton called the arrests a farce. "They were not playing cards, but some Chinese game, solely for their amusement," the two men argued in an open letter. "They attend to their own business, trouble nobody, pay their debts, and take patiently their share of the bullying and imposition that usually falls to the lot of the Chinamen in this country . . . We have no partiality for Chinamen; but right is right, and wrong is wrong, *even when a Chinaman is concerned* [italics added for emphasis]."

By 1888, there were two Chinese Sunday schools in Bloomington, with the larger at Second Presbyterian, which welcomed on average 10 to 12 students a week. *The Pantagraph* smartly observed that these immigrants were using Sunday school as a means to an end—the end being semi-fluency in English rather than spiritual conversion.

Six years earlier, 1882, Congress had passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, which halted all immigration into the country, an indefensible xenophobic measure that remained on the books until World War II. This act also required Chinese Americans to register with the federal government, and the paperwork included a photograph, physical description, occupation, place of residence and other information. In August 1892, *The Pantagraph* said that federal deputy revenue collectors were preparing to visit Bloomington to see to these certificates of residence.

A reporter talked to one of the city's Chinese immigrants, noting that the "Mongolian" was unaware of the Exclusion Act's registration requirement. "He knows nothing and cares less about anything except heaping up money," the reporter declared, adding that

the worries of registration “will cause him to jabber all day and night for a time, whereas he now jabbars only all day and half of the night.”

Sadly, this reporter’s mocking tone speaks volumes to the endemic, deep-rooted prejudices of the era. For Chinese immigrants, the promise of America was a mirage.