

Chinese achieved enormous feats on Donner railroad



The railroad made Donner Summit much easier to cross; now vehicles traverse it across the interstate.

Photo/Caltrans

By Abby Stevens, Moonshine Ink

When Charles Crocker, an executive for the Central Pacific Railroad, suggested in 1864 the company hire Chinese immigrants to help build the railroad, he was met with laughter.

The defense against hiring Chinese was that the men were small in stature and building railroads required brute strength. At the time, Central Pacific was charged with building the railroad from the West Coast to Utah, and Union Pacific was building its portion from the East Coast to Utah much quicker – so Crocker was feeling pressure.

Many Chinese men had immigrated to the U.S. to try and get a piece of the gold rush, but as jobs in mines dwindled, Central Pacific decided to capitalize and hired 50 men on a trial basis. The experiment went well – by 1865, there were 3,000 Chinese working on the railroad.

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