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FACING PREDETERMINED PREJUDICES THROUGH DECENTRALIZED SOCIAL
NETWORKS: A STUDY OF CHINESE LAUNDRYMEN IN ALTOONA, PENNSYLVANIA,
1870-1930

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Abstract

Scholarly research on Chinese-American immigrants typically focuses on Chinatowns within the country's biggest cities or experiences on the western frontier. However, the historical knowledge base is less familiar with the experience of Chinese immigrants in the areas in between. Halfway between Pittsburgh and Philadelphia, a small Chinese population of laundrymen developed in Altoona, Pennsylvania. Numbering no more than fifteen from roughly 1870 to 1930, this group of Chinese entrepreneurs carved a niche in white-dominated American society far from the physical protection afforded by tightly-knit cultural institutions. In contrast to the consolidated nature of urban Chinatowns, the laundrymen in Altoona were compelled to live in separate locations throughout the city to prevent economic competition with each another. But despite their physical separation, the group maintained a strong social network which met regularly and extended past the boundaries of Altoona to its suburbs and neighboring towns at least fifteen miles away. This ethnic solidarity provided support in a predominantly white society where prejudices and stereotypes were strongly developed even before the arrival of the first Chinese laundryman in the city.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The research for this paper began as a study of immigrant patterns in Tyrone, Pennsylvania, my home town. Known as the “Hub of the Highways,” the Pennsylvania Railroad developed the town into a vital railroad exchange point in the early part of its history.¹ After 1880, Tyrone functioned as a little sister town in comparison to nearby Altoona, a center of railcar development and repair for the PRR.² My original goal was to research the immigrants who passed through Tyrone temporarily on their way to Pittsburgh and beyond. I wanted to study



Figure 1: Map of Blair County, PA. "Blair County Pennsylvania Township Maps." US GenWeb Archives. US GenWeb Project, 6 Sept. 2009. Web. 19 Apr. 2010. <<http://usgwarchives.net/maps/pa/county/blair/usgs/>>.

the journey rather than the destination. However, the complexity of the subject deterred me, and I searched for immigrant networks in the town instead. Nothing seemed to catch my attention until, when recording the ethnic make-up of Tyrone, I came across a lone Chinese laundryman living on West 10th Street in the 1900 U.S. census.³ Curious as to why this man would be so ethnically isolated, I looked for Chinese immigrants listed in Altoona and nearby areas (see Figure 1). I discovered one man in

Altoona,⁴ one in Hollidaysburg,⁵ and one in Bellwood.⁶ When I looked through later U.S. census records, I found that the number in Altoona grew to include ten to fifteen Chinese. With the exception of one Chinese restaurant waiter,⁷ all of the Chinese were listed as laundrymen. Their separate location throughout the city was also intriguing. There was no designated Chinese neighborhood, nothing like a little Chinatown.

My observations sparked several questions. Why did these Chinese men migrate to Central Pennsylvania where there was no established ethnic support system? What was the make-up of their social network? Were they more isolated or more integrated than Chinese in larger cities like Pittsburgh or Philadelphia? In what social activities did they participate? What types of prejudice did they face from the predominantly white community? How did they interact with other Chinese in the community? How did the social relationships differ between the several Chinese residents in Altoona and the few in Tyrone or Bellwood? All of these questions have culminated into the purpose of this paper: to examine the experiences and social network of the Chinese laundrymen in and around Altoona, Pennsylvania in comparison to the close-knit, ethnic support system of Chinatowns in the big cities. Through extensive research in local census records and newspapers, I have pieced together a story of Altoona's Chinese laundrymen which has been lost to history until now.

In order to answer these questions, I first needed to understand the history of the Chinese experience in America. What circumstances drove them to immigrate to the United States? What prejudice did they face? Why would these particular immigrants migrate to Central Pennsylvania? What did Altoona offer them? And why did they all take up occupations in the laundry business? These questions I answer in the following sections of this chapter.

The next step was to develop a framework for my analysis. Altoona and its neighboring suburbs and towns – particularly Hollidaysburg, Bellwood, and Tyrone – became the geographical focus of my research because of the city’s significance to the Pennsylvania Railroad and its independence from other urban areas in Central Pennsylvania. I included Hollidaysburg, Bellwood, and Tyrone in my analysis because they are located along the main line of the PRR and their economies were and continue to be closely linked to that of Altoona. I focused on the time period roughly between 1870 and 1930. This is the period of growth and prosperity of Altoona, making it the most attractive time to move to the city. This period also coincides with the development and growth of the steam laundry. Before and after this period, laundry was primarily done at home. The Chinese immigrant population also migrated from the western states to the eastern states around this time, spreading more equally across the United States overall. Additionally, the dynamics of the debate over the restriction of Chinese immigration to the U.S. shifted between the 1930s and 1940s, creating larger occupational opportunities and altering prejudices. Because I wanted to answer questions related to the ethnic support system, social prejudices, and the reasons for migrating to Altoona, this time period afforded the best information. The Chinese also became a normal part of the community as the largest number settled in the city, and their presence attracted little interest except when deviant activity occurred.

I then focused on finding primary sources within the parameters of my framework. I used census records and Altoona directories for statistical, geographical, and demographic data. This information allowed me to pinpoint the location of laundries within and around the city, calculate the laundry industry’s rate of growth over its first twenty years, and determine basic biographical facts about the Chinese and other laundry owners. Articles from the *Altoona Mirror* and the

Tyrone Daily Herald served as my main sources of interpretive information. These articles provided me with glimpses of existing prejudices, the residents' reception of the Chinese into the community, daily activities of the Chinese, and news-worthy incidents surrounding the laundry establishments. This qualitative data filled in many holes which were present from the information provided by the census and directories; however, it still left many questions unanswered. Although a Chinese laundry existed in Bellwood for some time, no reference could be found outside of demographic data. Therefore, this laundry is not included in my interpretive analysis.

Through my analysis of this primary material, which I explain in Chapter 2, I support two main ideas. First, despite the fact that the greater Altoona community had not previously encountered Chinese immigrants prior to the establishment of the first Chinese laundry in the area, re-printed newspaper articles from urban areas across the country developed strong stereotypes in the minds of Altoona residents. When members of the community finally met a Chinese migrant for the first time, they drew on this knowledge base for keys to interaction. Therefore, prejudice in the greater Altoona area was not significantly different from that of larger cities across the United States. Second, the physical separation of Chinese laundrymen throughout the city did not necessarily make them more or less isolated or integrated than those in big city Chinatowns. Drawn together mainly by familial relationships, the Chinese in Altoona maintained close social ties through weekly gatherings. These gambling nights brought together a social network which extended beyond the city of Altoona to its suburbs and even its neighboring towns. In contrast to a typically consolidated Chinatown, the ethnic support system of Chinese laundrymen in Altoona stretched for at least fifteen miles.

History of the Chinese Experience in America

In the face of crumbling political, economic, and social conditions following the Chinese defeat in the Opium War (1842), men in the Guangdong region of China⁸ sailed from the port of Guangzhou⁹ in search of money-earning opportunities abroad. Migration was not a new experience for struggling Chinese men. It had been a common practice to migrate to Southeast Asia in search of labor.¹⁰ According to Erika Lee, the “Chinese...were customarily ‘transnational,’ maintaining families and socioeconomic, political, and cultural ties across international borders.” In 1848, tales of “Gold Mountain” brought these men to California to join countless American pioneers in the pursuit of fortune. The majority crossed the Pacific as sojourners rather than immigrants; they were migrant workers who left their wives, children, and parents at home to search for jobs.¹¹ Women occasionally accompanied men to America but in extremely small numbers. In the first two years of Chinese migration to California, only 2 women made the journey compared to 787 men. By May 1852, the male Chinese population increased to 11,787, while the female population increased to 7.¹² In 1880 and 1890, the number of Chinese men in the United States outnumbered women 20:1.¹³ These sojourners worked diligently, living on little and sending most of their earnings back to China. Overall, they intended to build their wealth in the United States and proudly return home, bringing honor to their family.¹⁴

Once the gold rush had dissipated, Chinese men found work in other mining and labor opportunities, but the most appealing job prospect was building the Continental Railroad.¹⁵ The Central Pacific Railroad Company commissioned Chinese labor in large numbers, preferring them over any other race or immigrant group, because they worked diligently at low wages. In fact, since there were not enough laborers in America to create an exclusively Chinese

workforce, the company recruited men directly from China. At the completion of the Continental Railroad, thousands of Chinese men were left unemployed. Many returned home to China, but those who remained typically engaged in farming or other occupations, like fishing, which were similar to those available in China.¹⁶

Some American employers also capitalized on the cheap, foreign labor force and began recruiting laborers from China to work in factories. This practice was similar to the contract labor system utilized in South America. Plantation owners in the Caribbean and Latin America had been exploiting Chinese laborers as a supplementary work force to black slavery since 1808. Much like indentured servitude, employers paid for travel and board in exchange for a certain amount of labor. When the contract expired, the men were free to return home, find another job, or start their own business. Next to slavery, contract labor was the cheapest form of service, and the conditions were not much better. The extent to which American employers used this particular system is debatable.¹⁷ It is clear that recruitment for factory labor brought the Chinese to areas of the East Coast during a period when their population was still concentrated in the West.¹⁸ But at the end of their service, the Chinese returned to the West Coast or even to China, rarely remaining as isolated individuals among the white population.¹⁹

First impressions toward the Chinese in America were relatively positive. Their skin tone and cultural traditions immediately set them apart from the predominantly white, European culture of the United States. However, their work ethic was admired by many. Employers welcomed the Chinese because they worked harder for lower wages than European immigrants or native-born Americans. The prominent citizens of San Francisco held a welcome reception for the increasing number of Chinese migrants arriving in the city on August 25, 1850. About one hundred Chinese, dressed in traditional Chinese clothing, participated in the processional.²⁰

During times of economic depression and recession following the Civil War, anti-Chinese sentiments grew exponentially. The laboring class blamed cheap, “coolie” labor for taking jobs away from whites. The Chinese became the scapegoats for the financial troubles of white men, who acted out their intense anger and fear on the race. Riots and violence escalated against Chinese workers in response to decreasing job opportunities and the defeat of strike efforts. In October 1871, Los Angeles became the location of one of the country’s most violent race riots.²¹ Anti-Chinese attitudes were so strong that the Chinese began to isolate themselves in Chinatowns. By banding together and limiting contact with other ethnic groups, they had a chance at decreasing negative pressures.²²

Beginning in the 1870s, politicians considered anti-Chinese immigration laws as a solution to combat growing prejudice and violence. The premise for the first laws was that violence would decrease in direct correlation with the Chinese population. Local governments enacted laws that restricted Chinese job opportunities in order to lessen the perceived threat on the white population. By the 1880s, political concerns had shifted from pacifying violence to forcing assimilation. Opponents of Chinese immigration focused on the money that Chinese laborers sent out of the United States because of lingering ties with China. In 1880, Chinese fishermen exported \$3 million of dried shrimp annually to China instead of spending their earnings in the United States.²³

Because many Chinese came to the United States with the intention of making money and returning home, they did not adapt to American culture as widely as other immigrant groups. Permanent relocation to another country clashed with Chinese cultural values. The Chinese were tied to their homeland on multiple levels. Multi-generational families expressed respect for each other through deeply rooted traditions. The family was the core value system of Chinese

individuals. Every life action reflected the values taught within the home. Immoral or purely independent actions brought shame to the entire family.²⁴ Therefore, permanently relocating abroad was equivocal to severing ties and denying one's family and culture.

Even those who planned on relocating permanently in the U.S. tended to hang on to Chinese cultural traditions as a result of social enclaves. Native-born Americans feared the strength of foreign cultural traditions in this ethnic group, especially because their traditions were more unfamiliar than those of other immigrant groups previously or currently entering the country. Many Americans believed that the Chinese were innately incapable of assimilation. Politicians used this argument when advocating a nation-wide ban on Chinese immigration.²⁵

The Chinese Exclusion Act was passed in 1882 as part of a larger effort to limit the immigration of undesirable groups to the United States. The act prevented Chinese laborers from entering the country for ten years and denied all Chinese the opportunity to become naturalized citizens of the United States. Chinese merchants, teachers, students, diplomats, and travelers were the exceptions to this law.²⁶ Those living in the country when the act was passed could not return to China and re-enter the U.S. without obtaining certification.²⁷ The act was intended to last ten years, but it was subsequently re-defined and re-extended until its repeal in 1943.²⁸

The loss of economic opportunities through prejudice and anti-Chinese laws forced Chinese into the margins of American society.²⁹ However, by accepting jobs in the service industry, which the average American citizen did not want, the Chinese were able to carve their own niche in the American economy. The laundry business, in particular, afforded Chinese immigrants the opportunity to control their own establishment. Free from prejudice in the workplace, they could work alongside fellow Chinese men, helping each other succeed.

Chinese men had been introduced to laundry work in several situations on the western frontier. In the mine towns, where there were no women to perform the task, they may have done laundry for fellow miners to make some extra money. Chinese with seasonal jobs also accepted laundry work during periods of unemployment. Chinese domestic servants were also taught how to do laundry by the women in their employer's household.³⁰ Opportunities to create laundry businesses in the city were abundant. Successful prospectors in San Francisco, who were known for their high style of dress, shipped their clothes to Hawaii for cleaning. Their crisp, starched collars and cuffs required a high level of skill, which the local laundresses could not achieve. Sending laundry so far away was expensive, and local laundry establishments were appealing options.³¹ A Chinese man named Wah Lee supposedly opened the United State's first Chinese laundry in San Francisco. According to Chinese-American stories, Wah Lee trained other Chinese in the laundry trade, and they later opened their own businesses in the city. His protégés then trained more Chinese men, and the Chinese laundry spread throughout the country as they migrated east.³²

It is important to note that though the Chinese were pioneers in the development of the industry in the West, they did not necessarily bring the laundry business to the East Coast. With advancements in technology and growing standards of cleanliness due to the Industrial Revolution, the steam laundry machine made laundry work a viable business venture. The steam laundry became prevalent in urban areas where single workers had little time to wash their clothes and women had fewer resources to do the wash in cramped urban spaces.³³ It was a lucrative industry for entrepreneurs; in 1909, 5,186 steam laundries reported a combined sales total of \$104,680,086. Because seventy-one percent of laundry workers were females,³⁴ the niche that the Chinese created in American society did not take away jobs from white men.

Most Chinese laundrymen preferred not to use the steam laundry machine.³⁵ Many would not even use a modern ironing board.³⁶ Much like their culture, the Chinese were slow to transition their practices with American modernity. They gained steady business by undercutting competing laundry prices.³⁷ Still, their relatively primitive techniques placed them in non-threatening roles in society.

The Laundry Business in Altoona, Pennsylvania

A railroad city from its conception, Altoona, Pennsylvania, was organized in 1849 around the development of the main line of the Pennsylvania Railroad and Horseshoe Curve, the PRR's most lauded feat of rail engineering. Finally linking the eastern and western portions of the PRR main line through the Allegheny Mountains in 1854,³⁸ the 220 degree curve³⁹ superseded the canals as the primary means of transportation across the state by cutting the transportation time from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh from four days to eight hours. The success of the railroad was shared with the developing city. Altoona was incorporated as a borough in 1854 and as a city in 1868. By 1870, it had just over 10,000 residents. Its number continued to rise, reaching about 40,000 by 1900 and over 80,000 at its peak in 1930.⁴⁰ In 1895, Altoona was the eighth largest city in Pennsylvania and aimed to be dubbed the third largest, behind Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, in the new century.⁴¹ Home to numerous railroad shops and production centers, Altoona and its surrounding areas expanded rapidly into the "Railroad Capital of the World."⁴² As long as the Pennsylvania Railroad remained strong, so did Altoona.

The main railroad line and its many shops dissected the city between Ninth and Tenth Avenues. The northwest side of the tracks became the city's business district, while the southeast side became primarily residential (see Figure 2).⁴³ The shopping district developed along Eleventh Avenue, roughly bounded by Eleventh and Sixteenth Streets.⁴⁴ Altoona's expanding

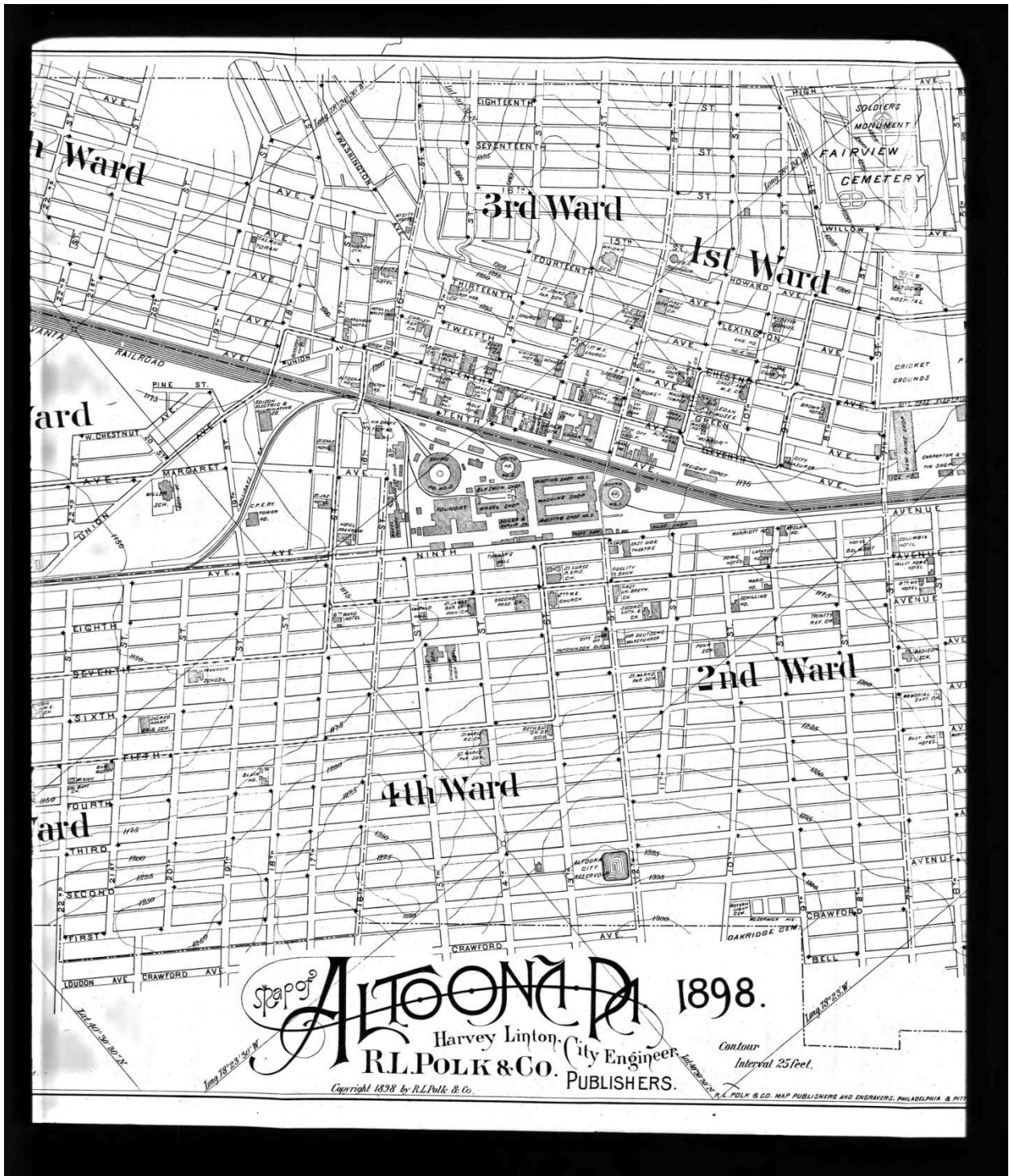


Figure 2: 1898 Map of Altoona City Center. *R. L. Polk's Altoona Directory, 1898-99* (Pittsburgh: R. L. Polk & Co., 1898) 2. Print.

population, urban specialization, and commercial prospects created the conditions for the development of a viable laundry industry. For the prospective Chinese entrepreneur, Altoona was an untapped source of wealth away from the saturated competition of Pittsburgh and Philadelphia.

According to the *Altoona Mirror*, a Chinese migrant by the name of Ah Sin opened the first laundry business in Altoona around 1873. Prior to his business, “the laundry work of the village was mostly in the hands of the housewife...The young fellow who boarded depended upon his landlady, or her hired help, to have his clean shirt ready when he wanted it. Washing and mending usually went in with the boarding contract, and even the hotels had their laundry work done by the weekly wash woman.” Soon many of Altoona’s young, single laborers patronized Ah Sin’s tiny establishment for the laundryman’s competitive prices and swift turn-out of work. The business quickly earned thousands of dollars in profits, sparking the development of several steam laundries and encouraging the migration of a network of several Chinese to the area.⁴⁵

In the heart of downtown Altoona, Alfred M. Cowen, an American entrepreneur,⁴⁶ opened the city’s first steam laundry business⁴⁷ in 1879 at 1402 10th Avenue.⁴⁸ Likely named to distinguish itself above the existing Chinese laundry, Cowen’s American Steam Laundry⁴⁹ capitalized on the growing demand for laundry services in the city. The business not only targeted the city’s single laborers and travelers, but also encouraged patronage from housewives through its specialization in collars, cuffs,⁵⁰ and other time-consuming laundry items.⁵¹

Between 1880 and 1900, the total number of laundry businesses in Altoona increased by one new establishment about every five years, with the exception of the period between 1888 and 1893, which increased by one every two years. For every failed laundry over this period, two

more businesses were established in its place.⁵² Entrepreneurs established many laundries during Altoona's period of prosperity but the city's most prominent and long-lasting laundry businesses became Cowen's Steam Laundry,⁵³ Otto's Model Laundry (later known as the Altoona Steam Laundry⁵⁴), and the Troy Laundry, which boasted agents in multiple locations throughout Altoona and its surrounding towns.⁵⁵ Residents, both American and Chinese, also established laundries along the main streets in Altoona's suburbs and neighboring towns – Hollidaysburg, Bellwood, and Tyrone.

In the period between 1880 and 1890, most of the laundry businesses, including the Chinese laundry, were located within Altoona's commercial center. Those on the periphery of this area were run by women who lived and worked closer to the residential streets.⁵⁶ With the introduction of the city's first electric trolley lines in 1891,⁵⁷ new laundries began to develop in the residential areas on the southeast side of the railroad tracks. Cowen's Steam Laundry, Otto's Model Laundry, and the Chinese Laundry remained in the city's center.⁵⁸ From 1900 throughout the 1930s, laundry businesses continued to spread throughout the residential districts.⁵⁹ Chinese laundries also began to locate farther and farther from the commercial district during this period,⁶⁰ forming a decentralized network of as many as fourteen laundries at one time.

Though the Chinese laundries in Altoona utilized hand powered machinery rather than modern steam laundry equipment,⁶¹ they obtained business through their competitive pricing. When the city's steam laundries collectively raised the price of collars from 2.5 to 3 cents, the Chinese laundrymen maintained their usual price, attracting a "rushing business."⁶² Because of language barriers, they also retained and developed several business practices, which were peculiar to Americans. The typical Chinese-American system of receipts was very complex and unique. In general, the laundryman assigned a number and a letter or Chinese symbol to each

receipt. Each customer was given a unique combination, which was written twice, once at the top and again at the bottom. When the customer dropped items off, the combination was recorded in a book with the customer's name or identifiable characteristics and the receipt was then ripped in half. The customer received one half and the laundryman kept the other with a list of items to be cleaned. When the customer returned on the designated day, he handed the receipt to the laundryman who then found its only match.⁶³ Several variations of this system existed and the extent to which Altoona's Chinese laundrymen used this particular one is indiscernible based on the available sources. It is clear that, for accounting purposes, Altoona's Chinese laundrymen added and subtracted with the use of an abacus, just like the typical Chinese laundry. They also transcribed records in Chinese characters.⁶⁴

Living in a small, predominantly male social network, Altoona's Chinese population retained close ties with their native land. Several continued to support wives and children at home in China, sending them a portion of their earnings regularly.⁶⁵ Others returned to visit family intermittently in hopes of finding a wife.⁶⁶ Only a few permanently relocated their wives and children to the Altoona area.⁶⁷ In addition to maintaining relationships, the laundrymen also preserved their practice of Chinese customs. They decorated their laundries and living spaces with hand-crafted figures,⁶⁸ imported items from China,⁶⁹ and celebrated the Chinese New Year together.⁷⁰

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- ²¹ Ibid. 50.
- ²² Ibid. 52.
- ²³ Ibid. 49.
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- ²⁵ Choy 268-71.
- ²⁶ Lee 3-4.
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- ²⁸ Lee 4.
- ²⁹ Tchen 159.
- ³⁰ Siu 52-3.
- ³¹ Ibid. 46.
- ³² Ibid. 45-7.
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- ⁴² Pulling 7.
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- ⁵⁰ Cowen’s Laundry Ad, *The Altoona Mirror* 26 Feb. 1910: 11.
- ⁵¹ Cowen’s Laundry Ad, *The Altoona Mirror* 8 Jan. 1910: 11; “Cowen’s Steam Laundry” 11.
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- ⁵⁴ Altoona Steam Laundry Ad, *Altoona Mirror* 19 Apr. 1890: 11.
- ⁵⁵ *Tyrone Daily Herald* 3 May 1887: 4; Troy Laundry Ad, *Tyrone Daily Herald* 22 Dec. 1891: 4.
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- ⁶¹ “Chink Laundries Number Fourteen” 1.
- ⁶² “Maintain Old Price,” *Altoona Mirror* 9 Jan. 1917: 16.
- ⁶³ Siu 64; “Chinese Laundry Checks,” *Tyrone Daily Herald* 7 Aug. 1902: 2.
- ⁶⁴ “Chink Laundries Number Fourteen” 1.
- ⁶⁵ 1900 U.S. census, Blair, Pennsylvania, pop. sch., Hollidaysburg Borough, ED 79, sheet 5, p. 5A, dwell. 87, fam. 89, Yee Din; 1910 U.S. census, Blair, Pennsylvania, pop. sch., Tyrone Borough, ED 87, sheet 10, p. 10B, dwell. 221, fam. 232, Sing Yee; 1910 U.S. census, Blair, Pennsylvania, pop. sch., Bellwood Borough, ED 63, sheet 11, p. 11A, dwell. 216, fam. 218, Lee Foo; 1910 U.S. census, Blair, Pennsylvania, pop. sch., Altoona City, ED 49, sheet 19, p. 19A, dwell. 299, fam. 308, Jim Yee; 1910 U.S. census, Blair, Pennsylvania, pop. sch., Altoona City, ED 55, sheet 5, p. 5B, dwell. 89, fam. 93, Yee Sing; 1910 U.S. census, Blair, Pennsylvania, pop. sch., Altoona City, ED 55, sheet 5, p. 5B, dwell. 89, fam. 93, Wah Hop; 1910 U.S. census, Blair, Pennsylvania, pop. sch., Altoona City, ED 47, sheet 13, p. 13B, dwell. 282, fam. 290, Sing Yee You Lee; 1910 U.S. census, Blair, Pennsylvania, pop. sch.,

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⁶⁷ 1930 U.S. census, Blair, Pennsylvania, pop. sch., Tyrone Borough, ED 77, sheet 2, p. 2B, dwell. 26, fam. 59, Charlie Yee; 1930 U.S. census, Blair, Pennsylvania, pop. sch., Altoona City, ED 5, sheet 21, p. 21B, dwell. 507, fam. 507, Look Yee; 1930 U.S. census, Blair, Pennsylvania, pop. sch., Altoona City, ED 17, sheet 1, p. 1A, dwell. 11, fam. 11, Yee Lee.

⁶⁸ "Chink Laundries Number Fourteen" 1.

⁶⁹ "Late News Paragraphed," *Altoona Mirror* 19 Dec. 1905: 1.

⁷⁰ "Late News Paragraphed," *Altoona Mirror* 12 Feb. 1907: 1.

Chapter 2

Reception of the Chinese by the Altoona Community

When Ah Sin first arrived in Altoona, “there was no particular notice taken of his coming, though when he appeared on the street, all hands ‘rubbered’ at the first Chinaman they had ever seen.”¹ The reason that the citizens of Altoona may not have paid much attention to the first Chinese laundryman in their city may be because their general opinion of the race had already been strongly developed from frequent newspaper reports of negative interactions in urban areas across the country. Typical stories included silly stories depicting the first “Chinaman on a bicycle,”² indiscernible accents,³ misunderstandings, nationally-reported riots, crimes, and debates. Most were heavy-laden with passionate anger, hatred, or ridicule. Therefore, observation was not necessary to formulate any new opinions. Ah Sin, unfortunately, only put a face to existing stereotypes.

Most Chinese laundrymen who migrated to Altoona were considered copies of the first. Quoting from the *Altoona Mirror's* July 1908 article on the history of the Chinese in the city, “there are fourteen of him [Ah Sin] in Altoona now.”⁴ They were often described as a group with little distinction among their personal qualities or activities. Only the most literate or well-known among the racial group merited distinction. One of the most recognizable laundrymen in Altoona was Yee Sing, owner of the 11th Avenue laundry. The central location of his laundry, as well as the trouble to which it was often related, placed his name in the newspaper more frequently than other Chinese laundrymen. He was also indicated as one of the better English speakers among the Chinese.⁵ The *Tyrone Daily Herald* likewise described Tyrone’s most prominent laundryman, Sang Lee, as “an unusually intelligent Chinaman.”⁶ He also attended Sunday school

at the local Presbyterian church,⁷ earning him civil recognition among the men in his household. One reporter stated that “Sang Lee has conducted his laundry in such a manner as to win the respect of all with whom he has had intercourse.”⁸

Just as the Chinese were generally described as a group, they were also treated as objects instead of people. They were commonly considered to be void of emotion. One example of the dehumanization of the Chinese laundrymen in Altoona is found in a 1922 newspaper article entitled “Finds Lover Gone After Long Hike.” As stated in the article: “Supposed authorities have united in declaring the Chinese an unemotional and unromantic race. If this be true, Yee Man Joe, aged 14, of this city has made rapid strides toward Americanism. For Yee Man is now back in Altoona after a fruitless pilgrimage to Pittsburgh in search of his youthful sweetheart, Ming Wong, whom he was unable to find.”⁹ The writer suggests that the inability of the Chinese to love is not due to racial differences but cultural ones. Because Yee Man Joe exhibits love, he must be loosening ties to Chinese culture, becoming more humanized as a result.

Chinese cultural practices, as many Altoona residents would have believed, made the Chinese predisposed to deviant acts. Most did not belong to the Christian faith. Instead, they worshiped idols which they carved themselves. Their unyielding practices were considered “primitive;” they would not even use modern machinery in their laundry businesses. Because this uncivilized, heathen race did not possess Christian morals or the good sense of modern science and industry, they likely did not possess the ability to empathize or determine right from wrong, acting only on sinful impulse. The newspaper warned the community that their general ignorance to American customs and the English language projected a childlike quality, but this was just a clever façade. Most Chinese could not be trusted. Even the small number residing in Altoona was considered dangerous because of these stereotypical, innate qualities. They were deceptive

characters, who appeared innocent but hoarded American money to send to China and corrupted American men by supplying them with opium.¹⁰

Because of national newspaper stories and stereotypes, Altoona's citizens expected the Chinese of their city to engage in criminal activity, just like they believed all Chinese did. On November 15, 1904, the front page of the *Altoona Mirror* read: "For the first time in the history of the city, a Chinaman was arrested this morning." The article suggests surprise that an arrest did not happen sooner since the first Chinese laundryman arrived thirty years earlier. Sin Lee, a laundryman on 11th Avenue, was arrested on the charge of larceny for refusing to provide Councilman Gust Keller with his laundry because he did not have a receipt. Outraged at Sin's unwillingness to submit, Councilman Keller originally intended to settle the dispute with violence but then resolved to fetch the police. Though the laundryman undoubtedly exhibited a lack of concern for customer service, he was merely following his business practice by asking the Councilman to return later with a receipt. However, the newspaper article places the laundryman in the role of "Sinner," while the Councilman is considered the hero who put Sin Lee in his rightful place as a subordinate member of society.¹¹

After the arrest, trouble seemed to be expected around the Chinese laundries of the city. Police were attracted to the various establishments for physical disputes,¹² loud noises,¹³ and opium dealing. On August 24, 1908, police arrested eleven Chinese laundrymen for possession of opium at the 11th Avenue laundry and a Chinese restaurant on 16th Street during subsequent raids.¹⁴ On June 11, 1925, another Chinese laundry yielded "the largest quantity of smoking opium confiscated in this district for more than ten years."¹⁵ Even when the Chinese were not directly involved, shady activity seemed to occur with the 11th Avenue laundry as a backdrop. In 1907, a group of Assyrians were arrested for fighting in an apartment above the laundry,¹⁶ and in

1915, a man was arrested after falling through the laundry window.¹⁷ Around times of cultural celebration among the Chinese laundrymen, trouble was expected. Likely for this reason, the *Altoona Mirror* found it necessary to report a statement in February 1907 that the Chinese New Year was celebrated “in a quiet way.”¹⁸

Sometimes police officials acted on stereotypes without cause. On November 17, 1920, Yee Sing, the owner of a Hollidaysburg laundry, was found dead. Policeman Bowman, Coroner Chester Rothrock, and Dr. Frank Shoemaker attended to the scene. Though the newspaper article summarizing the event in 1973 suggests that there was no additional evidence to inspect, the three men “decided to slit the bedding and the two mattresses. The mattresses were sewn full of folding money...[to the amount of] \$5,689.24. After they were through with the checking of money matters, they noticed some large envelopes tacked to the walls back of pictures...about \$600 was found in the envelopes.”¹⁹ The men were likely acting on the common stereotype that the Chinese hoard their earnings, hiding thousands of dollars in their homes instead of placing it in the bank.²⁰ On this day, their curiosity was satisfied and the stereotype fulfilled in the case of Yee Sing.

The exotic customs of the Chinese population also fascinated the greater Altoona community. Chinese laundry booths were popular attractions at annual city festivals and fairs.²¹ The *Altoona Mirror* made a point to record gifts which were given by Chinese laundrymen to particular associates. These included fireworks,²² charms,²³ a handmade silk scarf, special teas, and lily bulbs – all luxurious items which were imported directly from China.²⁴ Newspapers printed many stories about typical Chinese laundry practices in the big cities. Readers found systems of checks and balances, laundry name meanings, and symbolism peculiar in comparison to modern steam laundries. However, they admired the resourcefulness of the Chinese in creating

unique systems to bypass language barriers.²⁵ These stories tended to disregard the variation available within these systems. They relied on a singular stereotype instead of examining the practices employed by the city's own Chinese laundrymen. Because most of Altoona's laundrymen were listed as able to speak, read, and/or write English at least minimally in the U.S. census records, it could be assumed that they would have adapted their system of receipts to include English terms for the interest of their customers. Therefore, the system described for the use of laundrymen who were yet unable to speak any English would not have completely applied to the practices of laundrymen in Altoona. This, however, did not seem to deter the writers of the *Altoona Mirror* and the *Tyrone Daily Herald* from printing these types of stories as fact.

Altoona's neighboring town, Tyrone, exhibited evidence of a thorough curiosity of Chinese customs during its earliest encounters with local Chinese laundrymen. The *Tyrone Daily Herald* catered to this fascination with a detailed, front page story on the funeral of Yee Ching. Yee had opened Tyrone's first Chinese laundry with his brother Sang Lee in 1887. He had been suffering from malarial fever for several months before he passed away in early September of the same year. On the morning of September 7th, a funeral procession, consisting of Sang Lee, an unnamed relative, and about seven townsmen, marched to Tyrone's cemetery where the deceased was to be interred for four years, at which time his remains would be removed to China. The article described the scene of the Chinese funeral in full detail, ending with this comment: "Thus is the life of Yee Ching ended in Tyrone and in this world. Their whole life is a strange one to Americans and it is only fitting that their departure from this world of busy, bustling activity should be characterized, as is their life, by their own queer notions of what is right and proper."²⁶

Tyrone considered its Chinese population a novelty, referring to the single laundry and family of five male relatives as "Tyrone's Chinatown." Overall, the newspaper's tone reveals a

sense of pity for what was considered the cultural and religious ignorance of the group. This perspective likely stems from the fact that most of Tyrone's Chinese population consisted of children and teenagers. In 1893, Sang Lee, who was 31-years-old at the time, left his relatives to spend a year in China. Those remaining in the laundry were his 18-year-old uncle, Yee Sang, 11-year-old brother, Yee How, and 19- and 8-year-old cousins, Yee Show and Ying Gang.²⁷ Criminal deviance did not seem to be part of the newspaper's perception until Louis Yee was arrested during the August 1908 police raid on Yee Sing's 11th Avenue laundry in Altoona.²⁸ This particular viewpoint was the tone set by the *Tyrone Daily Herald* and does not mean that the Chinese population was treated better in Tyrone than in Altoona. According to Jean Yee, her parents, Charlie and May Yee, who opened a laundry in the town in 1923, combated high prejudice to gain respect in the community.²⁹ Overall, the stereotypes and daily interactions among the white and Chinese communities in the greater Altoona area were similar to those expressed in larger urban areas.

The Chinese Social Network In and Around Altoona

Without detailed personal testimony or stories from descendants, it is impossible to know exactly how Chinese laundrymen in the greater Altoona area interacted with the predominantly white community or the extent to which they adopted American customs. It is illogical to expect social isolation among such a small Chinese population, and it is clear that friendly interactions did take place outside the ethnic group. Several laundrymen sought guidance from white business owners and gave gifts to white associates. Charlie Buck, owner of an Altoona laundry on 11th Avenue below 17th Street, was arrested for disorderly conduct while fraternizing with a white woman named Eva Wilson.³⁰ Lee John led a gambling night at his 16th Street restaurant with several white men in attendance.³¹ It would also be safe to say that the Chinese in Altoona

were not integrated into the predominantly white community at a higher level than the Chinese in larger cities. We know that Sang Lee of Tyrone attended Sunday school at the local Presbyterian church,³² and a few laundrymen in Altoona supposedly embraced the Christian faith. However, many of the laundrymen still favored Chinese religious customs.³³ They also received the social support necessary for retaining traditional customs through close contact with family in China and other members of the Chinese community in the greater Altoona area.

The make-up of interactions among fellow Chinese laundrymen is clearly discernable. The laundrymen were distributed variably throughout Altoona, forming a decentralized rather than concentrated Chinese community. But despite physical separation to deter occupational competition, the group maintained strong social ties. Many of the city's laundrymen gathered on Saturdays and Sundays to gamble and socialize. During the police raid on August 24, 1908, officers arrested Yee Sing, Yee Wah, Yee John, Yee Hong, Yee Pin, Yee Bot, and Yee Jim of Altoona, Wah Lee,³⁴ formerly of Hollidaysburg,³⁵ Yee Louis³⁶ and Yee Yen of Tyrone, all of whom were gathered in Yee Sing's laundry.³⁷ With the recurrent surname Yee, it can be presumed that social ties were based on familial ties. This relation created a social network which extended beyond the city of Altoona and into the neighboring suburbs and towns, at least fifteen miles away. Individuals travelled across the city or by rail once a week to experience companionship and to express themselves in the comfort of ethnic solidarity. Relatives and associates beyond the greater Altoona area also visited occasionally from towns such as Huntingdon³⁸ and Harrisburg.³⁹ Though the resident Chinese population of Altoona numbered around fourteen⁴⁰ at one point, the number of Chinese in the city on a particular day could add up to a number greater than that due to the associated social network.

The laundrymen in Altoona were also connected to Chinese communities in Pittsburgh,⁴¹ Philadelphia,⁴² California, and other western states. They used each other as jumping points as they travelled and settled across the United States. When new Chinese arrived in Altoona, they stayed with relatives or associates who already owned established laundry businesses. They lived and worked at these places to earn money or learn the trade, eventually seeking a location for their own establishment.⁴³ They likely wrote about their success to others, who were encouraged to travel to Altoona and repeat the process. Sometimes acquaintances remained temporarily, continuing to move eastward. Other times, they settled in the area for many years. Therefore, the social network in Altoona can also be equally viewed as a migratory network.

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- ¹ “Chink Laundries Number Fourteen,” *Altoona Mirror* 24 July 1908: 1.
 - ² “A Chinaman on a Bicycle,” *Tyrone Daily Herald* 28 Oct. 1890: 2.
 - ³ “Chinamen Passed Through,” *Evening Mirror* [Altoona, PA] 18 June 1877: 1.
 - ⁴ “Chink Laundries Number Fourteen” 1.
 - ⁵ “First Chinaman Arrested,” *Altoona Mirror* 15 Nov. 1904: 1.
 - ⁶ “Note From Tyrone’s Chinatown,” *Tyrone Daily Herald* 27 Apr. 1893: 4.
 - ⁷ *Tyrone Daily Herald* 12 July 1888: 4.
 - ⁸ “A Dead Chinaman,” *Tyrone Daily Herald* 8 Sept. 1887.
 - ⁹ “Finds Lover Gone After Long Hike,” *Altoona Mirror* 29 Aug. 1922: 13.
 - ¹⁰ “Chink Laundries Number Fourteen” 1.
 - ¹¹ “First Chinaman Arrested” 1.
 - ¹² “Offenders in the Police Net,” *Altoona Mirror* 21 Sept. 1907: 12.
 - ¹³ “Police News in City Courts,” *Altoona Mirror* 2 Aug. 1909: 12.
 - ¹⁴ “Police Raid Opium Joints,” *Altoona Mirror* 24 Aug. 1908: 20.
 - ¹⁵ “Chinese Laundry Yields Much Dope,” *Altoona Mirror* 11 June 1925: 22.
 - ¹⁶ “Fight Among Assyrians,” *Altoona Mirror* 26 Oct. 1908: 1.
 - ¹⁷ “Local Police Record,” *Altoona Mirror* 8 Mar. 1915: 20.
 - ¹⁸ “Late News Paragraphed,” *Altoona Mirror* 12 Feb. 1907: 1.
 - ¹⁹ Os Figard, “\$5,689 Found in Two Mattresses,” *Altoona Mirror* 11 Jan. 1973: 6.
 - ²⁰ Siu 157.
 - ²¹ “Sodality Bazaar to be Big Event,” *Altoona Mirror* 1 Oct. 1920: 2.
 - ²² “Grand Fireworks Display,” *Altoona Mirror* 5 July 1907: 1.
 - ²³ “Chink Laundries Number Fourteen” 1.
 - ²⁴ “Late News Paragraphed,” *Altoona Mirror* 19 Dec. 1905: 1.
 - ²⁵ “A Chinese Sunday School,” *Tyrone Daily Herald* 20 June 1887: 3; “Chinese Laundry Names,” *Tyrone Daily Herald* 26 Feb. 1901: 1; “Chinese Laundry Checks,” *Tyrone Daily Herald* 7 Aug. 1902: 2.
 - ²⁶ “A Chinese Funeral,” *Tyrone Daily Herald* 7 Sept. 1887: 1.
 - ²⁷ “Note From Tyrone’s Chinatown” 4.
 - ²⁸ *Tyrone Daily Herald* 24 Aug. 1908: 4.
 - ²⁹ “Reunion Time For Class of ’49,” *Tyrone Daily Herald* 3 Sept. 1994: 1.
 - ³⁰ “Police News in City Courts” 12.
 - ³¹ “Police Raid Opium Joints” 20.
 - ³² *Tyrone Daily Herald* 12 July 1888: 4.
 - ³³ “Chink Laundries Number Fourteen” 1.
 - ³⁴ “Police Raid Opium Joints” 20.
 - ³⁵ “Fire in Hollidaysburg Last Evening,” *Altoona Mirror* 28 Feb. 1896: 2.
 - ³⁶ *Tyrone Daily Herald* 24 Aug. 1908: 4.
 - ³⁷ “Police Raid Opium Joints” 20.
 - ³⁸ “Note From Tyrone’s Chinatown” 4.
 - ³⁹ “Police Raid Opium Joints” 20.
 - ⁴⁰ “Chink Laundries Number Fourteen” 1.
 - ⁴¹ “Finds Lover Gone After Long Hike” 13.
 - ⁴² “A Dead Chinaman.”
 - ⁴³ *Fierstines’ Altoona City Directory, 1884-85* (Altoona, PA: Fierstine Brothers, 1884) 128; *Clark’s Altoona City Directory, April 1886* (Altoona, PA: C. B. Clark, 1886) 293; *Clark’s Directory of the City of Altoona, PA for the Year 1888* (Altoona, PA: Charles B. Clark, 1888) 121, 212; *Clark’s Directory of the City of Altoona, PA for the Year 1890* (Altoona, PA: C. B. Clark, 1890) 399; *Clark’s Altoona Directory 1891* (Altoona, PA: C. B. Clark, 1891) 357.

Chapter 3

Conclusion

While keeping in mind the consolidated nature of big city Chinatowns, the goal of my paper was to examine the social network of the decentralized Chinese community in Altoona, Pennsylvania and its relationship with the predominantly white community as a whole. Local newspapers, acting as the voice of the predominant ethnic group, allowed me to interpret and analyze leading prejudices and stereotypes associated with the Chinese laundrymen of the city and surrounding areas. It is clear that residents in the greater Altoona area were exposed to a national perspective on Chinese immigrants which allowed them to develop predetermined viewpoints on the ethnic group long before their first encounter with Ah Sin, the first Chinese laundryman to settle in the city. Newspaper articles continued to propagate these stereotypes to readers even when circumstances suggested that the laundrymen of Altoona did not necessarily meet these archetypes.

On a more limited level, U.S. census records, Altoona directories, and newspaper articles allowed me to piece together the social support system of the Chinese laundrymen. Though they located their businesses and homes in separate areas of the city in order to avoid competition with one another, Altoona's Chinese residents maintained a close-knit social network. This network, which was cemented by familial relationships, extended beyond the city. Railway connections allowed Chinese laundrymen to travel to a central gathering place from Altoona's neighboring suburbs and towns at least fifteen miles away. It is clear from newspaper articles that one of the regular activities of this group was gambling; the Chinese community also celebrated cultural festivals together. However, further social activities and cultural support can

only be postulated from here. Gambling nights may not have been family friendly. Therefore, married men, their wives, and children either participated in other social events or they were more isolated from the Chinese community. There is no way to know for sure without documented evidence.

Because local newspapers presented an outsider's view of the Chinese community, little information exists from the perspective of the Chinese laundrymen. What is available has been quoted in and interpreted by the newspaper, putting its context and accuracy into question. Many of the Chinese in the Altoona area left no descendents and the relatives of those who did would be difficult to track down. Many questions, therefore, are left unanswered. Exactly why did these Chinese laundrymen decide to move to Altoona? What did the Altoona laundries look like? What system of receipts did the laundrymen use? What cultural items were most valued? What were daily interactions like between fellow Chinese and Altoona residents in general? Why did they, or why didn't they, settle permanently in the community? Perhaps the persistence of racial prejudices prevented Altoona's Chinese laundrymen from putting down permanent roots in the area. Life may have been extremely difficult without the support of a consolidated social network. Over time, they may have grown weary of intense cultural pressures to assimilate. Perhaps extensive detective work could reveal some of these answers. However, most will remain a mystery and left to assumption. Recorded experiences from Chinese laundrymen in larger cities could reveal possible answers, but it would be unwise to generalize given the particular make-up of the social network explored in this paper.

In order to discover circumstances similar to those discussed here, historians in the field of Chinese-American history can shift their focus away from the big cities and explore the possibilities available in smaller urban areas like Altoona. Further study of these areas may yield

comparative results which can lead to general interpretations for Chinese immigrants living outside urban Chinatowns. By researching locations outside the typical geographical parameters of the subject, historians can bring a greater complexity of experiences to the field. Limited sources should not deter this type of analysis because, as exhibited in this paper, any amount of new information is helpful in fully understanding the Chinese experience in America.

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