



Preliminary Overview

Passport in Time

Oregon Chinese Diaspora Project



Malheur National Forest
Blue Mountain Ranger District

July 15 – 26, 2019



Figure 1. Pin flags mark metal detector "hits," some of which were tested to confirm potential artifact locations and concentrations. A suspected rock hearth feature is located in the foreground of this image, as well as a modified can which was likely used as a lantern.

Historical Background

Gold was discovered in Grant County in 1862, which brought miners and other enterprising individuals to the area. Records indicate there were Chinese immigrants living in Grant County by at least 1866, when a placer gold claim was sold to a Chinese-owned and operated mining company. The Chinese population of Grant County in the 1870 census (which was the first census in the area) was 940 (about 42 percent of the total population of the County), which included at least 853 individuals identified as miners. Further records suggest that from 1870 to 1880 over 80 percent of all placer and hydraulic gold mining operations in the county were Chinese-owned and operated, and the majority of miners in the area were Chinese. This data suggests that for over 10 years the majority of gold miners in Grant County were Chinese immigrants.

With such large populations, where did all these individuals live? Both Canyon City and John Day had well-documented "Chinatown" communities. Many Chinese individuals lived in smaller Grant County communities, such as Susanville, and remote camps located near mining claims and activities, such as the Ah Heng site.



Figure 2. (Left) Malheur National Forest intern Sabin, Blue Mountain Heritage crew member Matt, and PIT volunteer Dave complete metal detector survey at the Ah Heng 2 site. (Right) A fragment from a pickaxe was recovered during metal detector survey at the Ah Heng 2 site.

The Oregon Chinese Diaspora Project

The Oregon Chinese Diaspora Project (OCDP) is a partnership dedicated to the study and interpretation of the history of immigrant Chinese gold miners in Oregon. The partnership includes the Malheur National Forest, the Southern Oregon University, Laboratory of Anthropology (SOULA), the Kam Wah Chung State Heritage Site, and the Grant County Historical Museum. The group includes more informal partnerships throughout the State with the Medford District Bureau of Land Management, the Oregon Historical Society, and the Portland Chinatown Museum.

In 2019, the OCDP organized an archaeological field school through the Southern Oregon University, Laboratory of Anthropology and hosted by the Malheur National Forest. Other outreach projects included a series of public lectures (including three in Canyon City); a presentation at the Northwest Anthropological Conference in Kennewick, Washington; and an episode of Underground History on Public Broadcasting Service affiliate station Jefferson Public Radio. Additionally, members plan to present at the Society for Historical Archaeology conference in Boston, Massachusetts in the winter. The OCDP and research from this project are currently being utilized for two Masters of Arts graduate theses, and hopefully more in the future.

Passport in Time Project

Passport in Time (PIT) is a Forest Service volunteer program. The PIT program pairs interested volunteers with archaeologists who work together on research, data collection, and interpretation projects located on public lands throughout the United States. Our recent Passport in Time project supports and complements several shared goals of the OCDP partnership. PIT volunteers provide valuable data available to researchers, students, and professionals interested in studying the Chinese diaspora in the Northwest. Advertising and recruiting through the nationally-known PIT program also provides an opportunity to share OCDP goals and research with a wider audience.



Figure 3. (Left) Blue Mountain Heritage crew member Tatiana with her metal detector "find." (Right) Several artifacts were observed on the surface of the Susanville site, including fragments of Chinese brown glazed stoneware (CBGS). These jars and vessels were imported from Southern China in the 19th century.

We just completed our third year of testing at suspected Chinese miner habitation sites on the Malheur National Forest. Volunteers provided valuable assistance to this multi-year project, which operated in tandem with a Southern Oregon University, Laboratory of Anthropology (SOULA) archaeological field school.

Nineteen Forest Service PIT volunteers donated over 680 hours during two 5-day sessions. Additionally, 10 youth crew members and two adult crew leads contributed 60 hours to the project.

The 2019 PIT project was held for two weeks in July. Volunteers removed brush, cleared sites, completed pedestrian survey, identified surface artifacts, conducted metal detector assisted survey, and completed preliminary subsurface testing. Volunteers worked at three sites with known or suspected associations with immigrant Chinese placer miners.

Preliminary 2019 Results

Many of the locations where historical mining activities occurred and where Chinese gold miners lived are located on the Malheur National Forest and are visible as archaeological features and remains. These sites were occupied from a few weeks to several years, and range from ephemeral tent camps in remote locations to substantial camps located near mining activity centers. Multiple time periods and technological processes are represented in the archaeological record and a major challenge is sorting out the overlapping evidence of several time periods and technologies.

Metal detector survey and limited site testing were utilized at three sites on the Blue Mountain Ranger District to confirm suspected site boundaries and locate artifact concentrations and potential site features. We hope to excavate and investigate several features and potential artifact concentrations in the future.

Two sites, known as Ah Heng 1 and Ah Heng 2, are the locations of habitation areas occupied by Chinese placer miners. Historical documents suggest 20 or more individuals might have lived at these locations in the late 1860s to early 1870s. Artifacts and features also suggest a possible metalworking shop at one of these locations.

Volunteers removed brush and materials to open up the site in order to complete metal detector survey and testing. They also completed metal detector survey and identified several areas of interest for further testing.

The third site is the suspected location of several buildings from the 1860s mining community of Susanville. The site includes the suspected location of a hotel, a stamp mill, and two potential structures, which historical documents suggest were the homes of immigrant Chinese placer miners. Volunteers removed brush, identified surface artifacts, conducted metal detector assisted survey, and completed some limited subsurface testing. Volunteers identified several artifacts observed at other Chinese-occupied sites and were able to identify several features we believe are structure or cabin foundations.

Currently, the Blue Mountain Ranger District of the Malheur National Forest has 12 confirmed Chinese habitation sites. Further identification and testing of potential habitation sites are planned in the future. Several of the 12 confirmed sites were tested and excavated in 2017, 2018, and 2019.

Summary



Figure 4. (Left) PIT volunteers Doug and Shannon and Blue Mountain Heritage crew member Jacquie created survey "lanes" to ensure thorough and complete survey occurred across the site. (Right) PIT volunteer Michele shows off an artifact from the Susanville site.

During the 2019 PIT project sessions, volunteers worked on three sites associated with immigrant Chinese placer miners located on the Blue Mountain Ranger District of the Malheur National Forest. Two sites were associated with the 1860s Ah Heng Mining Company and one site was located near the 1860s mining community of Susanville.

The majority of gold miners in Grant County were Chinese immigrants who were often members of highly-organized and successful Chinese labor and mining companies. They represented nearly half of the population of Grant County in the 1870s and nearly all identified mining companies during this period were Chinese-owned and operated. Chinese immigrants worked and lived in mining camps now located on the Malheur National Forest, and the evidence of their daily lives and material existence can be observed in the archaeological record.



Figure 5. Volunteers cleared brush and debris from sites to facilitate metal detector survey.

Continued research and investigations with the Oregon Chinese Diaspora Project will contribute to the broader narrative about the composition of 19th-century Grant County and the Pacific Northwest.

Thank You Volunteers, Visitors, and Supporters!

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Forest Service Visitors: Bob Foxworth, Colleen Malaney, John Lee, Laurie Montgomery, Beth Parker, Shawna Clark, Jesse Merrifield, and two North Fork John Day River Watershed Youth Conservation Crews.

Blue Mountain Ranger District Heritage Program members: Tatiana Watkins, Jena Jones, Matthew Beavers, Emma Vance, and Jacque Cooper.

Prairie City Ranger District Heritage Program members: Robert Dickenson, Marley Chynoweth, Laura Bruns, Shahaylie Smarr, Grant Puckett, Diane Zentgraf, Madde Kunkel, Brookelin McKay, and Zach Flathers.

Malheur National Forest Heritage Program interns: Jackson Gibson, Kim Anderson, and Sabin Wright.

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