



## **Denver's Historic Chinatown, 1869-1940**

Of the over 200 Chinese communities that once existed in the American West, Denver's Chinatown was one of the largest and most prosperous. Chinatown's origins can be traced to an anonymous Chinese immigrant who arrived in Denver in June 1869. He was probably one of the Chinese railroad workers who were mostly responsible for building the western half of the famous Transcontinental Railroad that unified the country economically and culturally.

Chinatown was located on Wazee Street between 15<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Streets, extending up to 22<sup>nd</sup> Street. It was a flourishing frontier community that provided a wide range of ethnic goods and services in a welcoming environment to Chinese immigrants working in Colorado and the Intermountain West. The Chinese immigrants performed mainly physical labor such as working in mines and building infrastructure. Eventually, they were relegated to marginal livelihoods such as laundrymen and cooks.

Even though there were comparatively few Chinese residents, the local white population perceived them as an economic and cultural threat. Chinese encountered racial hostility and were denied civil rights, economic opportunity, and social equality. This hostility gave rise to "The Chinese Question," a national controversy over whether Chinese laborers should be allowed to immigrate to the United States.

Local antagonism led to Denver's anti-Chinese race riot. On October 31, 1880, an estimated 3,000 to 5,000 Denverites descended upon Chinatown to destroy it and drive out the Chinese. During the mob's rampage, they lynched and beat to death **a** laundryman named Look Young. Though the murderers were brought to trial, they were acquitted of the

crime. Despite continued tensions, most of the Chinese community remained to rebuild Chinatown.

What sounded the death knell of Denver's Chinatown were national laws preventing Chinese immigrants from establishing families in America and even from entering the country. Ironically, Denver's anti-Chinese riot was cited as one of the reasons why the US Congress enacted the disreputable Chinese Exclusion Act (1882) to ensure social stability.

Since the end of World War II, Chinese and other Asian Pacific Americans have returned to Denver's lower downtown area to live and work. No longer confined to an ethnic enclave, they can now be found throughout the Greater Denver Metropolitan area and Colorado.