

BETSY MOORE'S HOMESTEAD AND CHINESE INTERACTIONS IN YUBA COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

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Excavations at CA-YUB-1753H revealed a domestic residence that was occupied between 1890 and 1910. This matched archival research that revealed it was the homestead of the widow Betsy Moore. Artifacts recovered during the excavation provide evidence that Betsy was possibly either using Chinese food goods to feed her children or having a Chinese individual looking after her children while she worked away from the homestead for a month at a time.

This paper will examine how a recent archaeological excavation on the Plumas National Forest illustrates how social and cultural interaction between Euro-Americans and the Chinese immigrants can be quite complex within the archaeological record. The majority of the Chinese sites that have been excavated within Butte, Plumas, Sierra and Yuba Counties have been associated with gold mining and contain a lower percentage of Euro American artifacts while small percentages of Chinese artifacts have been located with Euro-American sites. The Betsy Moore homestead, CA-YUB-1753H, is an example of a site with mixed Chinese and Euro-American artifacts. Excavation at this homestead yielded a relatively large portion of Chinese artifacts which included a rather unexpectedly high percentage of artifacts classified as food refuse and containers. These food related artifacts consisted of large amounts of Chinese Brown Glazed Stoneware, which within the study area had not previously been documented in Euro-American sites. This presentation explores possible reasons for this presence and its implications on social interactions between these two cultural groups.

During the 2014 field season, Plumas National Forest archaeologists excavated a small ca. 1890s-1910 Euro-American homestead site for determination of eligibility for the National Register of Historic Places. The Betsy Moore homestead is located south of the town of Challenge in Yuba County (Figure 1) at the foot of the Sierra Nevada mountain range within the Foster Bar Township (U.S. Department of the Interior 1905). Following the initial Gold Rush of 1849, the area's timber industry gained prominence and many small logging communities were established and prospered (McDonald and Lahore 2013). However in 1893, Yuba County was hit by the effects of a nationwide depression leading to economic hardship and population decline. The general population of the county during this time declined between 10 and 15 percent (Hunt 1913:151; Porter and Wright 1895:74). Within the region both large-scale mining and the timber industry had waned and the surrounding area was in financial distress. The small towns and communities along with the scattered homesteads that once flourished turned back into small-scale gold mining and subsistence farming; this depression left the population looking for any available work.

The Chinese immigrants filled many low wage jobs, which during economic downturns became contentious. They were frequently blamed for taking jobs that could be done by Euro-Americans which in turn led to Anti-Chinese movements. Although it appears that Chinese communities were often vilified, many Chinese individuals continued to be employed by Euro-Americans. This appears to have been a popular sentiment at the time and was voiced in print throughout the late nineteenth century. For example,

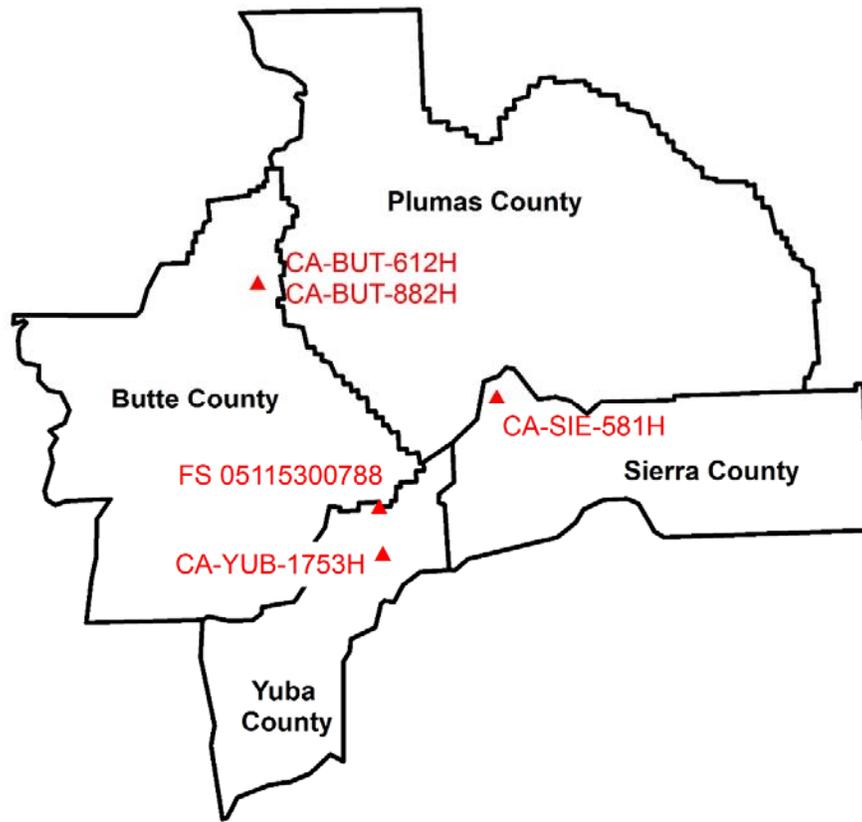


Figure 1. Site location map.

in 1877 many California newspapers republished an article from the Boston Advertiser that claimed hundreds of Chinese were employed by wives of men who habitually denounce Chinese labor (Sacramento Daily Union 1877). Recent studies have shown that the Chinese were continuously integrated throughout the economy of the west both before, after and even during the Anti-Chinese movements (Orser 2007; Voss and Matthews 2015).

Betsy A. Moore and her husband purchased the house in 1892 and it is believed that Betsy's husband died sometime between 1896 and 1900 leaving her widowed and having to support five children. In 1904, Betsy applied to homestead the house and 164 acres. In the application, the house is listed as having three rooms and measured only 20 by 24 feet. The application also indicates that four acres of the homestead was fenced with twenty apple trees and one acre was planted as a garden which she had maintained since 1893. A small barn housed six head of cattle, chickens, turkeys and hogs (U.S. Department of the Interior 1905). The presence of the garden, orchard, livestock, and some of the fancier goods recovered during the excavation indicate that at least while her husband was alive the family was financially stable. After the death of her husband we believe Betsy began to struggle financially with the burden of supporting her children. This impoverishment may be evidenced through the fact that she worked in the laundry trade (U.S. Census Bureau 1900a) leaving the kids for a month at a time to earn money (U.S. Department of the Interior 1905) and the fact that she sold half of the homestead the day after it was finalized in 1905 (Yuba County, California Deed Book 55:358-9).

During the excavation only the house foundation was located. Small descendant apples trees were found near the area believed to have been the homestead's garden area. These match the garden location

that can be seen in the 1937 air photo (Figure 2). No evidence of the barn or fence line were identified. The features that were relocated included the fireplace, basement, and privy.

Excavation of these features provided strong evidence that the house burned with the entire Moore family personal belongings, and was left untouched after the fire. The archaeological and historic records indicated that the house burned down sometime between December 1904 and 1910, thus providing a glimpse into a turn of the century rural family home.

The artifact assemblage recovered during the excavation matches the historic record of the Moore's occupation. The artifacts, which included Euro-American white improved earthenware and blue transferware, bottle glass, pressed glass containers and bowl fragments, cast iron stove parts, clock parts, keys, carriage parts, wire and square nails, all date to this time frame. Corset, garter belt fasteners, and calico buttons support the presence of females while the presence of children living in the house is supported by doll and marble fragments. These artifacts are what you would typically expect to find in a small Euro-American family household (Moore et al. 2015).

Surprisingly a total of 11% of the highly fragmented, melted and burned artifacts recovered from the site were of Chinese origin. Due to the poor condition of the artifacts recovered, minimum number of actual items was not calculated. It is important to note here that there was a disproportionate percentage of food related artifacts that were identified as Chinese versus Euro-American. Fragments of large barrel and globular Chinese Brown Glazed Stoneware (Figure 3), celadon rice bowls, spoons and cups, Bamboo pattern rice bowls, and ginger jar fragments made up 86% of the food remains and containers recovered from the site. Of these items, the Chinese Brown Glazed Stoneware fragments represented the largest category. This high number is thought to be, at least in part, due to the loss by fire of perishable food related items such as faunal which did not survive the fire. The family is believed to have grown or raised a good portion of the food as indicated by the historic record yet the evidence for this did not survive. The remaining Chinese artifacts represented personal items and included fragments of a sweet pea liquor server, one medicine bottle, one coin, and one possible fragment of opium tin. It should be noted that these Chinese artifacts were recovered mixed into the main Euro-American artifact assemblage and not segregated to a particular location or deposit within the site (Moore et al. 2015).

The presence of Chinese artifacts in Euro-American households of this time is not uncommon. Chinese coins and glass rings have been used to decorate sewing baskets. Excavations of 1880-1890s Euro-American households in Howland Flat (CA-SIE-581H) in Sierra County have recovered Chinese coins and large glass rings (excavation records, Feather River Ranger District, Oroville California). It was not unprecedented for Euro-American households to consume Chinese medicine. One example of this can be seen in Sierra County in a 1916 historic record which documents a Euro-American man buying Chinese medicine for his sick child (Garvis 2004:377). It is also known that Euro-Americans consumed opium. Both Chinese medicine bottles and opium paraphernalia have been recovered from Euro-American household refuse piles. Chinese ceramics have been found in small amounts within Euro-American sites, typically in the form of double happiness, bamboo and celadon rice bowls. Although the use of the items other than the opium paraphernalia and medicine bottles is unknown, they may have been decorative as curios of the exotic.

Chinese Bamboo rice bowl fragments (excavation records, Feather River Ranger District, Oroville California) were documented during excavations at the Becker Hotel (CA-SIE-581H) in Sierra County even though this hotel advertised emphatically in 1880s newspapers that it did not employ Chinese workers (Garvis 2004:370). To date, Euro-American sites excavated on the Plumas National Forest have a noticeable lack of Chinese Brown Glazed Stoneware.

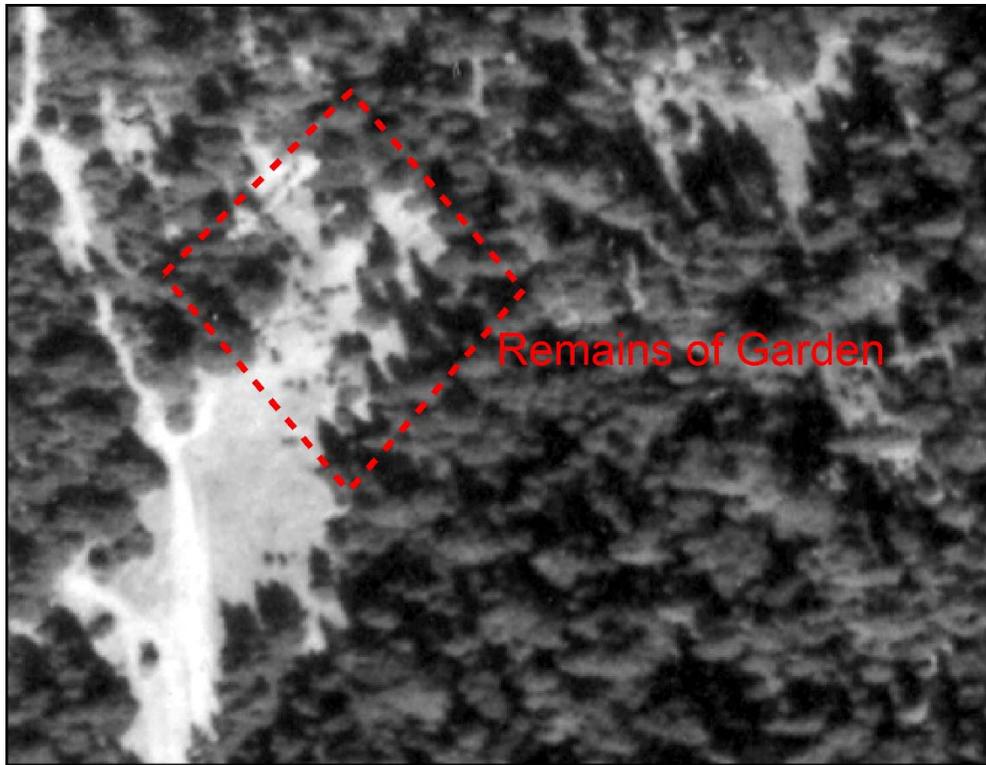


Figure 2. 1937 air photo showing the remains of Betsy Moore's garden (Plumas National Forest, Oroville).



Figure 3. Chinese Brown Glazed Stoneware recovered near the fireplace of CA-YUB-1753H.

The opposite has been shown of Chinese occupied sites in which the consumption of both Chinese and Euro-American goods has been well documented. Examples of this include two small Chinese gold mining sites located in Butte County (CA-BUT-882, CA-BUT-612) and one located in Yuba County (FS Site 05115300788) that demonstrate a mix of ethnic goods. The percentages of the mixture varies possibly representing the occupant's access to Chinese goods. All three sites contain Chinese Brown Glazed Stoneware (Maniery and Maniery, 1998; Tordoff and Maniery, 1986).

What appears to be different from these examples and the Betsy Moore homestead is in the quantity of Chinese ceramics and the predominance of Chinese Brown Glazed Stoneware. The Chinese artifacts were unexpected at this homestead as no historic record of an interaction between the Chinese and Betsy Moore has been found to date. There are several intriguing possibilities to explain the predominance of Chinese Brown Glazed Stoneware in this Euro-American household.

One explanation for the presence of the Chinese artifacts at the Moore home could be that the family had a Chinese cook. There were documented Chinese cooks in the surrounding area and at least one living in a Euro-American household. When examining the Chinese presence in the area surrounding the homestead we looked at the Foster Bar Township. There, the Chinese population in the 1900 census consisted of 34 Chinese. Most were employed or engaged as miners, with a few working as laborers and cooks. All were listed as living in Chinese-only households (U.S. Census Bureau 1900a). By 1910, there were only five Chinese, a miner, two cooks, a waiter and a farm laborer. One of the cooks and the farm laborer lived in Euro-American households (U.S. Census Bureau 1910). The possibility that the Moore Family had a Chinese cook is considered unlikely as it is believed that Betsy would have been unable to afford this due to the declining economy and the financial strain of being a single mother of five children with a homestead to maintain. It is in no way definitive but it should be noted that there were no Chinese listed in the 1900 census records as living in the home (U.S. Census Bureau 1900a).

Another possibility is that the house held a Chinese boarder. Taking on boarders was a common way to supplement household income at this time and all indications are that Betsy needed all the supplemental income she could obtain. Due to the small house size and the amount of people already living in it, accommodating an additional person would seem to have been challenging at best. This coupled with the fact that, as just noted, the 1900 census does not list a boarder living in the home makes this notion also appear unlikely. Furthermore if a Chinese boarder had in fact been living in the home it would be expected that the Chinese artifacts would have been concentrated in one area of the archaeological deposit.

A third explanation could be that a Chinese neighbor may have helped look after the homestead. The 1904 homestead application states that Betsy would be gone for a month at a time and that she left someone in charge. Betsy had two daughters that were in their late teens and who would have been old enough to take care of the younger children. However, with the responsibilities of a large garden along with the apple trees, cattle, chickens, turkeys and hogs as well as the household duties it is possible that she would have left a neighbor in charge of watching over her children. When reviewing the 1900 census there are four Chinese men whose occupations were listed as laborers living two houses away from Betsy (U.S. Census Bureau 1900b). Perhaps one or more of these men looked after the children and homestead while she was gone and this could have included the preparation and consumption of food within the home. If this was the case it may explain the amount of Chinese artifacts and Chinese Brown Glazed Stoneware found at the site.

The presence of Chinese artifacts could also have been a result of her family buying cheaper Chinese food and goods. With Betsy's profession listed as a laundress and the fact that she would leave for a month at a time likely indicates she traveled to a larger town to work. The closest large towns were either Marysville or Oroville. Either of these towns would have provided the most employment opportunities. Both towns contained large amounts of Chinese Laundries and according to W.T. Ellis, the Chinese controlled the laundry business in Marysville (Ellis 1939). If Betsy was working in either town, it is likely that she was in contact with Chinese workers. Through this contact she could have obtained and brought Chinese goods back to the homestead. Even with this possibility it could be that the family was not actually consuming Chinese food, but could have been reusing the Chinese Brown Glazed Stoneware containers for

pickling or as storage containers. Betsy could have also brought back the other Chinese table ceramics at the same time to replace broken Euro-American pieces or as curios.

The purchasing of Chinese goods does seem to match what Yuba County historians have documented in oral histories; that poor families in the 1890s bought and used Chinese products because they were cheaper than the Euro-American products. They have claimed that this practice has been documented two miles from the Moore Homestead in the neighboring logging community of Wrangletown. Wrangletown was a poor white logging town associated with the nearby Leach Railroad and Lumber Company and Chinese rice bowls and bottles have been documented within the town (McDonald and Lahore 2013:25).

Either of the last two possibilities indicate a high level of acceptance of Chinese culture. If Chinese neighbors were watching Betsy's children for a month at a time that would seem to indicate a high level of trust regardless of ethnicity. If the family was either consuming Chinese food or just reusing Chinese Brown Glazed Stoneware containers it indicates an acceptance of the use of Chinese material culture.

The excavation and study of the Betsy Moore homestead site has provided a general understanding of the idea that cultural boundaries appear fluid and adaptive in order to meet local, communal circumstances. All of the previously discussed possible explanations hint at interesting social interactions occurring between the Moore family and the Chinese living in Yuba County. Unfortunately, we don't know definitively the nature of the social interaction between Betsy Moore, her family and the local Chinese that resulted in the deposition of the Chinese artifacts at her home. The possibility that poor families would use Chinese goods for economic reasons appears to be an interesting line of inquiry for future studies. Overall this study has illuminated the need for future archaeological studies of Euro-American households that contain Chinese goods. This hopefully will lead to a more nuanced understanding of the interactions between the Chinese and Euro American immigrants, especially in small rural mining, lumbering and agrarian communities.

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