

Chin Gee Hee

Chin Gee Hee was born in 1844 and a teenager when he arrived in San Francisco. After a stint at laying railroad tracks, he came to the lumber mill at Port Gamble, Washington in 1862. There he washed clothes. In a few years, he sent for a wife from China, who became a cook at the mill.

A quick learner and a natural talker who was knowledgeable and conversant in current events, Chin became fluent in English as well as Samish. He developed many friends, including the family of Chief Sealath. At the urging of one-time Seattle mayor and lumber mill owner Henry Yesler, who frequently traveled to the Kitsap Peninsula, Chin and his wife moved to Seattle in 1873.

At the invitation of Chin Chun Hock, the owner of the Wa Chong Company, Chin Gee Hee became a junior partner by securing one-fourth of the business. Both men were from the same village in China - Look Choon village in Toishan.

Labor contracting became Chin Gee Hee's main interest and specialty. It was a job that perfectly complemented his language skills, bicultural knowledge, outgoing personality, and financial aspirations. He established the Wa Chong Company as the leading Chinese labor contractor in the Northwest Territory. He sent Chinese laborers to work on farms, railroads, coal mines, lumber mills, and public works projects, as well as to homes to work as servants or cooks.

The Wa Chong Company steadily grew and prospered with Chin Gee Hee's role as a labor contractor. Nevertheless, the company's involvement in labor contracting was troublesome to Chin Hock, who wanted the business to primarily focus on merchandise and dry goods, and importing/exporting goods to China.

During the anti-Chinese ordeal in Seattle, Chin Gee Hee was the leader and spokesman for the Chinese. He was quick to inform the Chinese Consul in San Francisco of events and the danger the Chinese faced. He also collaborated with Judge Thomas Burke to protect the Chinese, and represented the Chinese in talks and negotiations with the anti-Chinese committees. As a partner in the Wa Chong Company, he and other Chinese merchants refused to leave until debts due to his company were collected, and maintained detailed accounts of riot damages, which he reported to the Chinese Consul. Chin Gee Hee was among those Chinese who were taken from the Chinese quarters and marched to the docks by the anti-Chinese mob. But with the help of Judge Burke and the city's business and political establishments, the well-connected Chin and his family were among the handful of Chinese who stayed in Seattle.

Eventually, the pressures of the anti-Chinese climate and the lingering business tension between Chin Gee Hee and Chin Chun Hock became too much to handle. In 1888, they agreed to go their separate ways.

One year later, Chin Gee Hee started the Quong Tuck Company, another general merchandise store that contracted labor and imported/exported goods. His new company occupied a storefront at the corner of Second and Washington in a new building that he had built. The building was one block from the Wa Chong Company and one of the first brick buildings constructed after the Great Seattle Fire of 1889.

Having achieved financial success, Chin could have returned with his family to China. Instead, he prolonged his stay. Because of Chin's connections with local political and business leaders such as Burke and Jacob Farth (a banker), Chin and his family were relatively safe, and he could continue doing business in the city. However, Chin hoped for the swift return of other Chinese to Seattle so that there would be a greater demand for his goods and services. But very few Chinese were in the city and so Chin recruited Japanese from Seattle and Chinese from Portland

and San Francisco. These workers occupied his labor contracting jobs for the Great Northern Railroad and public works projects, including the cable car lines in downtown Seattle.

In 1905, he left the operation of his business to his son Chin Lem and son-in-law Woo Bing and returned to China to fulfill his dream of building a railroad in his native Toisan, the first railroad in China. Back in Toisan, he teamed with Yu Shek to form the Sunning Railroad Company. Between them, they raised \$3 million to construct the 85-mile railroad from Toishan to Pak-Kat, which is near Kwongchow.