

Yema-Po: Chinese Labor Camp

In 1979 a renovation of Chabot dam unearthed a century-old Chinese encampment buried in the creek embankment below. California State University Hayward was contacted and students excavated over 60,000 artifacts revealing the once invisible life, diet, and work habits of the 800 Chinese people who worked on Chabot dam from 1874-1892.

Soy pots and stoneware rice bowls spoke of familiar foods. Remnants of imported turtle and perhaps wild cat disclosed the use of traditional medicines for vitality. Opium bowls and paraphernalia pointed to the enjoyment of an ancient pastime. Rusting pieces of metal tools communicated the similarity of tasks performed by many in the gold mines of the Sierra and railways.

The excavators named the historic work camp “Yema-po,” Cantonese for “wild-horse slope.” This acknowledges the role of the Chinese laborers in running the horses across the dam to compact the soil during its construction, one of their many contributions. Just as the name “Yema Po” preserves their cultural heritage, we too can preserve their memory in the stories we tell of the dam.



Illustration by Nancy Han courtesy of EBMUD

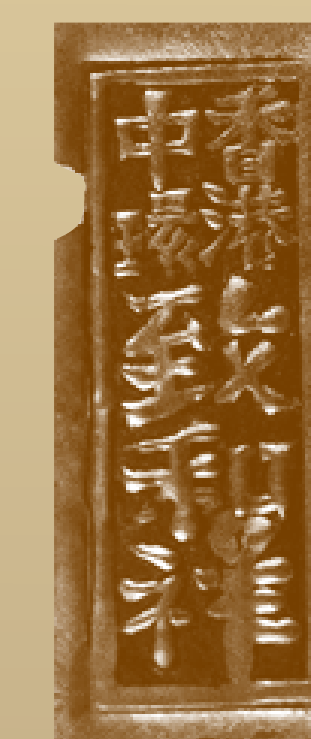
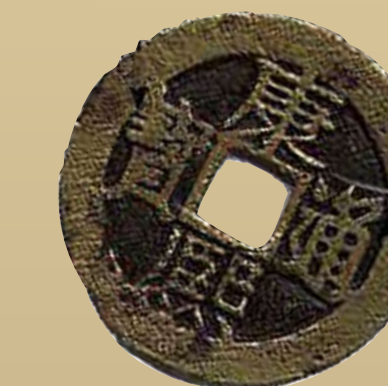


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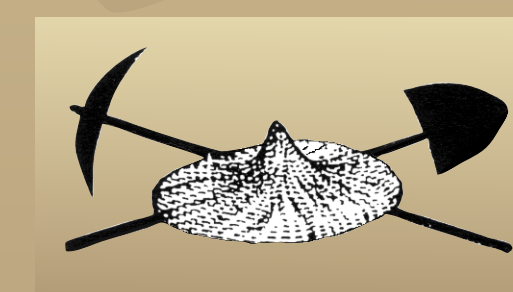
Items found at the encampment:



Chinese Coins



Lid to an opium box



Did you know that of the 20,000 animal bones found at Yema-po, 70% were pig, revealing a diet much heavier in pork than their Euro-American counterparts? Also found were the remnants of cuttlefish, duck, turtle, and rare fish like the puffer fish.

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